Becoming human
irony and the practice of philosophy in Lear, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard

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Abstract: As it has been convincingly demonstrated by the French scholar Pierre Hadot, philosophy originally consisted in a practice or 'way of life,' aimed at personal transformation through the enactment of spiritual exercises. Such a process of personal transformation took the shape of a progressive appropriation of wisdom on the philosopher's part, and was often described as a transition from a life of foolishness and confusion into one of clarity and insight. The goal of this work is to discuss how "philosophy as a way of life" has been practiced after its falling out of the philosophical mainstream in the 18th century. My thesis is that Jonathan Lear, Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard are all authors who can be described as practicing "philosophy as a way of life." In order to address their figures, I shall take as a point of entry the spiritual exercise of Socratic irony. Starting with a historical discussion of the practice of irony, I explore how my authors incorporate the latter in the light of their own commitments and metaphysical views. At the same time, I aim to connect irony to their ideals of human excellence, or, to the way in which they articulate the philosopher's achievement of wisdom. Finally, I shall draw all these elements together in order to present the three different configurations of "philosophy as a way of life" that have emerged from my discussion.

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PART 2:

HEALTH, GENEALOGY, AND DECONSTRUCTION:

NIETZSCHE'S ENACTMENT OF THE SOCRATIC TRADITION

INTRODUCTION

What is it to live a philosophical life? The goal of this dissertation is to elaborate a possible answer to this question while dealing with a set of correlated issues. These include matters such as what it is to practice philosophy, and what is the conception of the human condition underlying certain practices of philosophy. To give a thorough answer to all these questions would require many more words and pages that one can type within the limits set for a PhD dissertation. If one were to seriously tackle these matters, the resulting text would be long enough to flood the world – or perhaps the web, if such a thing were possible. Accordingly, this thesis is a modest but nonetheless rigorous proposal on how to approach the notion of a philosophical life – or that of "philosophy as a way of life." As is fitting for a doctoral dissertation, the present text will take a particular angle, and it will be limited to a particular historical period and to whatever a few selected authors might have to say on the topic. Before we get to discuss in depth the period and authors which will be the object of my work, I would like to offer a few introductory remarks.

First, because the object of our discussion is the nature of philosophical practice, it is necessary to discuss the nature of philosophy itself. This is a complicated question: different people, different ages, and different schools of thought have come up with competing definitions of philosophy. Preliminarily, we could stick to the Greek etymology, and agree that philosophy is the love of wisdom. This is arguably a definition that all the members of the philosophical community would be content with. Moreover, such a definition is already a step in the direction of discussing the nature of the philosophical life: after all, if philosophy is the love of wisdom, it follows that the philosopher must be the lover of wisdom, and the philosophical life must be a life inspired by such attitude.

Of course, to define philosophy as the love of wisdom is to offer a very vague formulation. After all, love and wisdom are signifiers which tend to sound rather empty: they definitely point to something – even a layperson has a grasp of these nouns and they are commonly used in ordinary language – and yet they are undeniably complicated and thick concepts. Therefore, we have just added a new layer of difficulty to our problem: not only we have at our own disposal different

historical definitions and practices of philosophy – certainly in part due to different understandings of the nature of love and wisdom – but we have also discovered that trying to answer the question concerning the nature of philosophy is already in itself a philosophical matter. Another way of putting it, is that to wonder what could be the nature of wisdom already implies being in a loving relationship with it: to try to understand how we could seek after wisdom, in a way which we would identify as love, is to establish precisely such a relationship. Hence, one way of beginning to philosophize is precisely to wonder what philosophy is, and a possible beginning of the philosophical life is precisely to wonder what such a life could look like.

Depending on a number of factors – spiritual and intellectual background, character, environmental influences of different sorts – different philosophers will adopt different representations of wisdom and different understandings of how to pursue a loving relationship with it. Such representations and such understandings develop organically with and therefore come attached to certain doctrines, theories, concepts, and practices which taken together are one species of the philosophical form-of-life. In this sense, we could say that there is a relative priority of ethics over metaphysics, or of practice over theory, in the sense that the discursive formulation of philosophical doctrines and the conscious encoding of sets of philosophical practice happen as the result and as the articulation of a particular instantiation of the philosophical life.[1] Such a compound of practices and notions will be the content of a more or less systematic intellectual and institutional organization, giving birth and shape to a particular philosophy – here meant as a particular school of thought and life. The transmission and teaching of such compounds – or philosophies – form a philosophical school; when a particular philosophical school crosses the boundaries of generations, the result is the institution of a line of transmission of a particular form of life, which is the trans-epochal embodiment of a particular form of philosophy.

These last remarks allow us to establish a fact. Not only it is the case that to enquire into the nature of philosophy is already a philosophical act – as it were, it is something accomplished already from "within" the field of philosophy – but the chances are that one will always start such

[1] See this in reference to Pierre Hadot and his interpretation of Hellenistic philosophy in Brian Gregor, 'The Text as Mirror: Kierkegaard and Hadot on Transformative Reading,' *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 28 (2011), p. 66.

an inquiry under the influence of one, or several, particular instantiations of philosophy.[2] In other words, one starts to philosophize only as the last representative of a long line starting at some point in the past. Such influences and starting points are not arbitrarily chosen, but spring from the actual, spiritual and material background of anyone aspiring to be a philosopher and to live the philosophical life. Someone who was born in Southern Europe – as I am – is very likely to pick the figure of Socrates as a natural starting point for the line of transmission within which his philosophical activity unfolds. Most probably, this person shall feel more acquainted with the figures of Plato and Kant rather than with those of Confucius and Adi Shankara – while not necessarily disdaining them. With respect to the present work, this implies that the necessity of restricting our point of view on the question "what is it to live a philosophical life?" is not simply the result of the material constraints of a doctoral dissertation. Rather, to focus the discussion on a restricted set of authors and philosophical perspectives, is a matter of intellectual honesty: to engage – critically, if necessary – with one's philosophical influences, interests, and sparring partners, is to acknowledge one's debt with one's own philosophical tradition, while at the same time offering something that might enrich it. So, what is this dissertation's starting position within the diversified field of philosophy? As I will articulate in detail, my starting point is Socrates, and his reception by three contemporary thinkers. The actual figure of Socrates will not be my main focus – beyond the first chapter there will be very little discussion of either Socrates or of the Platonic dialogues. Nonetheless, for reasons that hopefully will become evident during the course of my exposition, this whole work is about philosophy as practiced and lived after the example set by Socrates in Athens about 2500 years ago. I shall now introduce the argument of this work.

Following Pierre Hadot, I hold that prior to the Enlightenment a different understanding of the nature of philosophy was held within the context of European society.[3] According to this earlier understanding, philosophy was seen as something akin to what today we might call a wisdom

[2] I believe my insight echoes what Stephen Mulhall is arguing in the first chapter of his *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001). In particular, while interpreting Stanley Cavell's *The Claims of Reason*, Mulhall argues that 'for Cavell, what a distinctively philosophical problem might be is itself a philosophical problem, and one of its most fundamental ones,' (ibid., p. 7). We could say that one cannot start engaging with philosophy without philosophizing, or, that one can engage philosophically with philosophy only from within philosophy itself, thus being already engaged in philosophical activity. From this follows Mulhall's subsequent claim that for Cavell, to identify a particular text as philosophically significant is something that can be done only by an exercise of philosophical criticism. (ibid., p. 9)

[3] See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. and trans. by Arnold Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

tradition. In this sense, philosophy as understood by, say, Plato, Epicurus, St Gregory of Nyssa, and St Augustine was a transformative spiritual practice. This was a compound of theory and practice, where the two were conjoined by spiritual exercises aimed at transforming the individual into some ideal of human excellence. To be able to embody this ideal meant having achieved wisdom and having fully appropriated one's own human nature, having freed it from any sort of stultifying and malign influences. **As Peter Sloterdijk put it, when understood this way philosophy falls under the definition of 'practice, or exercise' where this is defined as a form of 'self-referential training' whose results 'do not influence external circumstances or objects, as in the labor or production process; they develop the practicing person himself and get him "into shape" as the subject-that-can.'[4]** In this regard, to gain membership of a school and to be obedient to its teachings and practices was an inescapable requirement within this setting, **insofar as they were the means necessary in order to "get into the shape" of wisdom and the "subject-capable-of" wise living according to the understanding of wisdom propagated by a particular school of philosophy**. These practices – the study of texts, meditation, contemplation, and memorization exercises, physical training – are called by Hadot 'spiritual exercises,' and this whole conception of philosophy is what he defines 'philosophy as a way of life.'[5] Unsurprisingly, Hadot interprets Socrates as a champion and paragon of this way of envisioning philosophy.

Between 1981 and 1982, Michel Foucault held a course at the Collège de France, later to be published under the title *Hermeneutics of the Subject*. There, he picks up some of Hadot's ideas, using them to isolate and discuss a number of issues in the history of thought. In his first lecture, Foucault argues that the concept of philosophy as a way of life – what he calls 'care of the self' – came to be disqualified after what he labels the 'Cartesian moment.'[6] According to Foucault, through his work Descartes reshaped the understanding of the Delphic maxim 'know yourself' and discredited the concept of 'care of the self' – that is, the pillars of the conception of philosophy as a way of life, which modern European philosophy had inherited from the Greeks and through the mediations of late-antique, medieval and Renaissance thought.[7] It is unclear whether Foucault

[4] Peter Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice*, trans. by Karen Margolis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 11.
[5] Matthew Sharpe, 'Socratic Ironies, Reading Hadot, Reading Kierkegaard,' *Sophia: International Journal of Philosophy and Traditions*, 55 (2016), p. 6.
[6] Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-2*, ed. by Frédèric Gros, trans. by Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 14.
[7] Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 14.

blames the person of Descartes for this shift, or if he is just making reference to the adoption of a Cartesian methodology and mindset, as if Descartes had set in motion a process which he had neither desired nor foreseen.[8] In any case, Foucault argues that a trait of the philosophical tradition predating Descartes was the belief that the truth could be accessible to the subject only on the condition that this would work on itself by the means of ascetic practices. In this sense, it was impossible for the philosopher to achieve truth, wisdom and freedom while remaining in his "starting condition." Caught as he was in his foolishness, he had to 'get into shape' in order to exit the dark cavern, and only through an enduring struggle for purification he could then be able to get access to the truth.[9] Borrowing Stephen Mulhall's words, we could say that philosophy was 'the education of grown-ups; its task was that of turning its interlocutors away from mindlessness.'[10] However, with the advent of the Cartesian method, the only criterion for having access to truth was evidence and knowledge – that is, a knowledge that now could be accessed through reason alone, without the need of enduring a progressive and total transformation of the self from foolishness to wisdom. We can also connect this transformation to the growing secularization of European intellectual circles, and with the subsequent waning of the concept of original sin among philosophers, something which caused them to lose any notion that there could be a significant and structural flaw in the way in which human beings have access to the truth. Foucault concludes that, 'the modern history of truth begins when knowledge itself and knowledge alone gives access to the truth. That is to say, it is when the philosopher (or the scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth) can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being as subject.'[11]

Hadot takes a slightly different angle on the subject, but his conclusions seem compatible with Foucault's. On one hand, he seems to discharge Descartes from any accusation, pointing to him as a true bearer of the tradition of philosophy as a way of life, and to his *Meditations* as a classic spiritual exercise.[12] He locates the move away from philosophy as a way of life to philosophy as we know it as taking place over the 18th century, with the establishment of modern

[8] Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 17.
[9] Ibid, pp. 15-7.
[10] Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, p. 18.
[11] Ibid., p. 17.
[12] Arnold I. Davidson, 'Introduction,' in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 33.

universities and the professionalization of the discipline.[13] Previously, the schoolmen of the middle ages had identified philosophy as an exercise of reason which should provide concepts and clarifications useful to facilitate the practice of theology.[14] Of course, medieval and modern theologians often belonged to social contexts – such as that of religious orders – favorable to spiritual practice. Hence, they kept living a philosophical life, one which was framed in Christian terms and around the priority of theology over what they understood as "philosophy proper." However, when later universities were secularized and moved away from the medieval model, this meant that philosophy came to be disconnected from theology, now an exercise increasingly detached from its last foothold in the world of spiritual exercises. In a way, we could say that Hadot focuses more on the institutional and existential side of this transformation, where Foucault, at least in this case, chooses to pay attention to strictly theoretical issues. In any case, they seem to agree that at some point between the 17th and the 18th century philosophy came to be understood as a search for truth which could be pursued without enduring any sort of ascetic struggle.

However, this transformation was neither sudden nor complete. Certain figures continued to uphold and argue in favor of the "traditional" understanding of philosophy. One individual that seems to belong to this line of survivors is Jonathan Lear – and so is, as Lear himself argues, the psychoanalytical movement at large, to which he belongs. Accordingly, Lear seems to be thinking along lines similar to Hadot's when he attributes to Socrates an early formulation and practice of that care of the soul which will later become psychoanalysis. Whatever the truth of Lear's claim, this is the direction from which he engages with Socrates: one which understands him as a practitioner of philosophy as a way of life. Therefore, in order to address the *Grund-* and *Leit-Frage* of this dissertation – once again, what is it to live the philosophical life? – we must undertake an in-depth analysis of the particular features of the philosophical life as it was instantiated by Socrates. Furthermore, since the subtext to this question is that we want to know what is it to live the philosophical life in today's context, we also need to analyze how the Socratic way of living philosophy has been received and interpreted. In particular, we want to know how interpreters relatively close to us in terms of culture and time have instantiated the Socratic practice of

[13] Hadot, ibid., p. 271.
[14] Ibid., pp. 269-71.

philosophy. Even more fundamentally, we want to know how philosophy as a way of life is possible in the aftermath of the Enlightenment.

I shall focus my attention on Lear's own interpretation of Socrates, together with that of two eminent Socratic philosophers: Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard. Their work anticipates Lear's, Kierkegaard even being a direct influence frequently cited by him. These three authors share a number of themes, and Lear's work is an excellent point of entry for an examination of what Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have written. Furthermore, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are both identified by Hadot as survivors of the "old ways,"[15] and they themselves argued forcefully against a certain impersonal, academic, and overly rationalistic way of doing philosophy. For different reasons they both had a dynamic relationship with Socrates. In different ways, these figures were inspired by the wise man from Athens yet tried to take a step beyond him – and so does Lear by claiming Socrates as an ancestor, if not an early practitioner, of psychoanalysis. These three philosophers stand close to us, well after the threshold represented by the Enlightenment, and yet they relate in a living way to Socrates and to the ideal of a lived philosophy.

So, we have a question, we have named the names, and we have sketched out how they relate to one another. There is a further layer I shall add to these preparatory remarks: a specification of my way of reading Lear's interpretation of Socrates, concerning which particular aspects in the morphology of his philosophical practice I will be most concerned with. My argument is that the main instrument or spiritual exercise marking Socratic philosophy is the practice of irony. Accordingly, I will move from Lear's description of this concept and then uncover the ironic features of Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's philosophical practice. Given this context, I shall also consider how methodological considerations come together with and articulate the practice of irony in these three authors. As we will see, this also implies seeing how Lear, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard supplement their practice of irony with other spiritual techniques according to the different characters of their thought. Just as the philosophers of old strove to become sages or saints, so do Lear, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard hold different views concerning the ethical ideal which ought to be the end of spiritual practice. These ideals shall also be a matter of discussion.

[15] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 150-1.

In addressing the work of Lear, Nietzsche, and finally Kierkegaard, I shall employ a scheme whereby I begin by examining the practice of irony within each author's context; second, I shall offer considerations about each author's methodology; and finally I will close off by discussing their conception of the ideal human life. It is clear that there will be points where the three authors agree, and others where they differ. In the first chapter I offer some methodological reflections concerning this matter. Hopefully, the partial divergences between each author shall represent for the reader a glimpse into different forms of philosophical life, each partially overlapping with the other two discussed through this work.

In the conclusion I shall sketch a tentative synthesis of the different positions examined. Accordingly, some elements will be necessarily privileged above others. Nonetheless, I hope that someone who is interested in my topic but who does not share my conclusions shall find some use in my work: perhaps, in discerning the divergences between Lear, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard he or she shall move in a different direction, possibly following different threads emerging during the exposition, leading to a different expression of what the philosophical life could look like today. I hope that where my conclusions are to be found lacking, my dissertation might offer to the interested reader the materials for building his or her own picture of the philosophical life. No matter how much I could disagree with the features of this alternative conclusion, this would be in any case a remarkable result, and surely a task worthy of great effort.

PART 1:
THE WORK OF IRONY, THE WORK OF PHILOSOPHY:
LEAR'S A CASE FOR IRONY, WITH RESPECT TO HIS THOUGHT AND TO THE BROADER PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

Chapter 1) On the Concept of Irony: an historical and conceptual account from Socrates to Lear

1.1 *A Brief History of Irony*

As I have mentioned in the introduction, the practice of irony is crucial to my investigation. Accordingly, I shall start my analysis of the nature of the philosophical life, by discussing Jonathan Lear's study and use of irony. However, before I get to do so, I will recapitulate the history of the ways in which irony has been conceptualized. I believe that such an historical introduction is necessary for three different reasons: first, it will allow me to provide an historical background to my subsequent discussion; second, it shall help me to highlight some of Lear's key influences – both positive and negative; third, insofar as Lear's account of irony is the gateway through which I shall deal with the totality of Lear's, Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's thought, it is crucial that I manage to underline the ways in which this practice of irony relates to the broader history of the Socratic tradition.

In my summary of the history of irony, I shall pay particular attention to the way in which Socrates has always been seen as the paradigmatic ironist. Moreover, I will emphasize how since the first generation of philosophers after Socrates up until Kierkegaard's early works, there has been a growing emphasis on irony as a practice and a way of life.

Lear mainly works out his concept of irony in his 2011 book *A Case for Irony.* Admittedly, he is not terribly interested in what other authors, ancient and modern, might have had to say about irony. Beside Socrates and Kierkegaard, who he takes as his main interlocutors, he does not address directly any other conception or account of Irony.[16] Furthermore, his reception of Kierkegaard and Socrates is somewhat idiosyncratic, insofar as Lear consciously avoids discussing those works where scholars would normally look for their accounts of irony. For instance, Lear denies any relevance to Kierkegaard's doctoral dissertation, rather choosing to focus on the latter's mature writings.[17] As we shall see, Lear builds his reading of irony in Kierkegaard on a journal entry dated December the 3rd 1854. As regards Socrates, Lear contends that the whole discussion of "the problem of Socratic irony" has been focusing on the wrong aspects of Socrates's activities.[18] Thus, rather than discussing Socrates' argumentative practices – this would be the "standard approach" – Lear focuses on an episode in Socrates's life, reported by Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. In his story, Alcibiades tells how during the war fought by Athens against the Thracians Socrates stood for an entire night outside a tent while pondering a philosophical problem. I shall discuss later the details of Lear's reading of these texts. For now, it suffices to say that he works out his account of irony in conversation with Kierkegaard and Socrates, though paying a lot of attention to sources which at first sight may appear marginal to his project.

Lear himself is aware of the innovative nature of his work. Commenting on the "normal understanding" of what irony is, he argues that today irony is 'poorly understood,' and that this 'misunderstanding is pervasive in contemporary culture.'[19] Articulating his own position, Lear claims that 'irony is revealed neither by a majority vote of those who use the term nor by a glimpse of a transcendent idea, but by grasp of what should matter when it comes to living a distinctively human life.'[20] As I shall discuss in details below, by taking this position Lear is rejecting the two

[16] The only contemporary author covered by Lear is Richard Rorty. See Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 37-9.
[17] Ibid., p. x-xi.
[18] Ibid. As examples, Lear quote Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Melissa Lance, 'Reconsidering Socratic Irony,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. by Donald Morison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Allan Bloom, 'Interpretive Essay,' *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968); Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Donald Morrison, 'On Professor Vlastos' Xenophon,' *Ancient Philosophy*, 7 (1987), pp. 99-122.
[19] Ibid., p. ix.
[20] Ibid., p. ix.

ways in which irony has been normally understood. On the one hand, he is rejecting the mainstream discussion of irony, started by the early Greek interpreters. This is what we might call the majority vote of the Western philosophical tradition, which produced the "common" definition of irony as "saying something while meaning the opposite." On the other hand, Lear is also arguing against the Romantic understanding of irony as something concerning the fabric of reality itself. This includes the post-Romantic reception of this idea, and in particular Hegel's study of irony. Hence, what distinguishes Lear's position is his persuasion that we can understand what irony is only by making reference to 'what should matter when it comes to living a distinctively human life.'[21] In the terms that I have employed in the introduction, we could rephrase Lear's claim as follows: "irony can be understood only by making reference to what it means to live a philosophical existence."

Without denying the freshness of Lear's work, I shall argue that his "case for irony" is nonetheless rooted in both of these "rejected perspectives." Accordingly, I shall proceed as follows. First, I will outline the use and nature of irony in Socrates' thought according to the "classic" interpretation, discussing how the discipline of rhetoric established the mainstream understanding of irony and presented Socrates as the paradigmatic ironist. Second, I will discuss the shift in the understanding of irony happened with the advent of German Romanticism. In particular, I shall focus on the contributions made by Friedrich Schlegel, the main figure of this movement.[22] Finally, I will introduce Kierkegaard's treatment of irony in his doctoral thesis. As we shall see, this work represents a continuation of the Hegelian criticism of Romantic irony, while it also embraces some of the concerns of the pre-Romantic reception of irony. Furthermore, in this work – despite his criticism of Romanticism – Kierkegaard embraces the Romantic idea of irony as a way of life, thereby setting the stage for the later development of his thought.

I will skip any in-depth examination of what happens to the concept of irony between the work of ancient rhetoricians such as Quintilian and that of Schlegel. My reason for doing so is far from being arbitrary. According to Norman Cox, 'all serious discussions of *eironeia* followed upon

[21] Lear, *Irony*, p. ix.
[22] Robert J. Richard, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 20.

the association of the word with Socrates,'[23] an early example of which appears in Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*.[24] Later on, chiefly under the influence of Cicero's and Quintilian's work, irony was confined to the realm of rhetorical theory. The work of the Roman rhetorists stand as a an historical watershed, insofar as the concept of irony remained substantially unaltered for about twenty centuries, and understood according to the definition contained in the 4th century BC text *Rhetoric to Alexander*.[25] Within this book we find irony defined as 'blaming through praise and praising through blame,' or, more generally speaking, as the rhetorical practice of saying one thing while meaning the opposite.[26] Accordingly, writes D. C. Muecke, 'by the middle of the eighteenth century the concept of irony … had scarcely evolved … beyond the point already reached in Quintilian.'[27] Nonetheless, the common notion of irony was to be deeply transformed once its traditional reading met with the intellectual climate of German Romanticism. With the Romantics, irony turns from being an element of speech into a concept that describes a way of life, and gains metaphysical significance as it is linked to essential aspects of the world and of human nature.[28] This was a remarkable shift, to which all post-Romantic references to irony are indebted. With this move the Romantics brought irony out of the field of rhetoric into that of philosophy and metaphysics.

Without any further ado, I shall now turn to consider the history of the concept of irony, starting with the figure of Socrates.

1.2 *Irony across the Ages: from Socrates to German Romanticism*

Contrarily to what one might expect, in no passage of Plato's Socrates is reffered to as an ironist by his friends – or by himself. Rather, it was his opponents who accused him of being an *eiron*, that is, someone who practices irony.[29] This is the case, insofar as up to Socrates' times, the

[23] Norman Cox, 'Irony,' in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. by Philip Wiener, Vol. II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), pp. 626-634 (p. 627).
[24] Ibid., p. 627.
[25] Cox, 'Irony,' p. 627.
[26] Ibid., pp. 627-8.
[27] D. C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (London: Methuen & Co., 1970), p. 18.
[28] Cox, 'Irony,' pp. 629-30.
[29] Ibid., pp. 627-8.

practice of *eironeia* was understood as an act of deception or dissembling.[30] More precisely, as David Wolfsdorf shows discussing a passage from Oppian's *On Hunting*, *eironeia* 'is the use of deception to profit at the expense of another by presenting oneself as benign in an effort to disarm the intended victim.'[31] Accordingly, *eironeia* and its derivatives were originally meant as 'terms of abuse,'[32] and Plato reserves them more properly for the sophists.[33] Hence, when Socrates's opponents accuse him of being an ironist, they are basically claiming that he is a liar. One instance of such dynamic is the charge moved by Thrasymachus against Socrates in the first book of the *Republic*:[34]

'Ye gods! Here we have the well-known irony of Socrates, and I knew it and predicted that when it came to replying you would refuse and dissemble and do anything rather than answer any question that anyone asked you.' (*Republic I*, 337 a3-7)

In other words, Thrasymachus is accusing Socrates of being an ironist because he thinks that the latter is feigning ignorance, preferring to ask questions rather than answering them. In other words, Socrates possesses knowledge about the object of the discussion – in this case, justice – but claims to be ignorant in order to take advantage of his opponents and dismantle their views. Therefore, accusations such as Thrasymachus's were often focused on and motivated by what Socrates said. This led to an understanding of irony as feigning, primarily performed through verbal expressions, and to the subsequent attribution of irony to the domain of rhetoric.

Although the sincerity of Socrates's ignorance is a matter of dispute among modern scholars, early interpreters followed his accusers in not believing him; this has caused a tendency over the course of history to consider Socrates's praises and confessions of ignorance as disingenuous.[35] After the unjust and politically motivated death of Socrates, his disingenuousness was freed from any trace of malice, as irony was transfigured by Socrates's saintly character and by the moral contrast between him and his persecutors. As Vlastos puts it, Socrates came to be

[30] David Wolfsdorf, 'The irony of Socrates,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 65 (2007), 175-187 (p. 175).
[31] Ibid., pp. 107-118. See Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence and Greek Culture and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 35; Oppian, *Cynegetica* (Monachii: K. G. Saur, 2003).
[32] Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 50. For instance, see Aristophanes, *Clouds* pp. 448-50 where no clear distinction is drawn between the *eiron* and the *alazon*, the boastful one.
[33] Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 24.
[34] Gregory Vlastos, 'Socrates Disavowal of Knowledge,' *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 35 (1985), 1-31 (p. 4).
[35] Wolfsdorf, 'Socrates Irony,' p. 183. For a classic example of such a behaviour from Socrates, see *Euthyphro* 2c-3a.

seen as the very incarnation of *eironeia*, while being considered completely 'innocent of intentional deceit ... though ... serious in his mockery,' and 'dead earnest in his playfulness.'[36] In other words, the man who came to be considered as a paragon of irony was also thought to be exceptionally just and committed to truth: accordingly, Socrates's irony simply could not be thought in the terms of what *eironeia* meant up until that moment. As he became the paradigmatic ironist, Socrates transformed the ethical coloring of this word and caused *eironeia* to become – now Socratic – irony.[37] In this sense, the ancient interpreters maintained the idea that feigning was a component of irony, and yet at the same time they discharged this concept from any negative connotation. In contrast with Thrasymachus, they understood the goal of irony to be pedagogical and therefore beneficial,[38] rather than a strategy aimed at overcoming one's interlocutor.

This transformation of the concept of irony, together with a fixation on what came to be known as Socratic irony, occurred over the course of about three hundred years, and found its completion in Rome, in the first century BC.[39] As mentioned above, we find the first systematic discussions of irony in Aristotle, first in the *Rhetoric* – where Aristotle's account follows the traditional and pre-Socratic account of irony – and then in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, where the Stagirite gives irony respectability by contrasting it with boastfulness. The rhetorical tradition adopted the *Ethics*'s view of irony. Subsequently, irony is first listed as a common trope by Anaximenes of Lampsacus in his *Rhetoric to Alexander* and *Letter to Alexander*. By the end of the 1st century AD, the concept of irony was finally codified in its classic definition by Cicero and Quintilian. In the *Institutio Oratoria* Quintilian labels irony as a trope that belongs to the genus of allegory, and in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood.[40]

The formulations reached by the Roman rhetoricians remained the "standard" understanding of irony until German Romanticism. Thus, with very few exceptions, for twenty centuries irony was thought of as a literary or oratory technique.[41] However, the collision between

[36] Vlastos, *Socrates*, p. 29.
[37] Ibid., p. 29.
[38] Vlastos, 'Socrates's Disavowal of Knowledge,' p. 3.
[39] Vlastos, *Socrates*, p. 28.
[40] Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, pp. 50-1. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, trans. and ed. by D. A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 9.2.44: 'Contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est.' See also 6.2.15, where the relevant contrast, however, is between 'something different' ('diversum,' not 'contrarium') and 'what is said' ('quod dicit').
[41] Cox, 'Irony,' pp. 628-9.

this notion of irony with the one forwarded by German philosophers at the beginning of the 19th century pushed the history of this concept into its modern stage. The Romantics did not limit themselves to provide a new definition of irony. Irony, like any other concept, can receive a definition only insofar as it is a part of a wider conceptual and metaphysical system. Therefore, a change in any part of the system results in a re-definition of the remaining elements. Accordingly, the Romantic redefinition of the nature of irony was part of an effort aimed at developing a whole new understanding of reality.[42] This way, irony became an integral part of a newly-born metaphysical paradigm, as well as ceasing to be chiefly associated with rhetoric, thereby gaining full currency among philosophers.

In an age of uncertainty, and in contrast with the Neo-classical taste for harmony, the Romantics conceived reality as a flux, an endless succession of fragmented and uncomposed states of being where human nature melts away in the flow of reality. At the same time, the Romantic *Weltanschauung* channeled a desperate need to reach for the infinite.[43] In this context, the ironist becomes the person who turns to reality hoping to make something emerge out of it, who bears a longing for the absolute, and strives to reach this from the midst of the ever-flowing reality.[44] Therefore, from the Romantic point of view the stance of the ironist becomes the most suitable for human beings, insofar as irony acknowledges and expresses what human nature is. Specifically, being ironic means to embrace our longing for the absolute while at the same time realizing our structural incapacity to reach it. The ironist embraces both human finitude and our natural connection to the infinite, searching for a way to live out the existential contradiction embedded in this ambiguous condition. Having Socrates's example in mind, Quintilian had already contemplated the possibility that a whole life may be characterized by the practice of irony. Nonetheless, it is with the Romantics that the idea of irony becomes primarily associated with a

[42] Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen & Co., 1969), p. 182.
[43] Richard, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, pp. 21-2. In this respect, post-Kantian philosophy played a major role in inspiring the Romantics's longing for the infinite, particularly the thought of J. G. Fichte. See Elizabeth Millan, "Fichte and the Development of Early German Romantic Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Fichte*, edited by David James and Günter Zöller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 308-325; Terry P. Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), *passim*.
[44] Cox, 'Irony,' pp. 629-30.

certain way of life.[45] Now, irony was no longer regarded primarily as a rhetorical tool, and was transformed into a general attitude to be upheld in any area of life.

Under these premises, it is no surprise that, as Muecke put it, the theory of Romantic irony became 'a rallying point for many of the leading ideas of Romanticism,' insofar as it now 'became possible to generalize it [irony] and see all the world as an ironic stage …, it could now also be thought of as a permanent and self-conscious commitment.'[46] Friedrich Schlegel provided what is possibly the strongest as well as the fundamental version of Romantic irony,[47] clearly distinguishing between his understanding of irony and that passed down by the tradition. As we find reported in his notebooks, he held that 'no things are more unlike than satire, polemic, and irony. Irony in the new sense is self-criticism surmounted; it is never-ending satire.'[48] At the same time, while moving irony from the field of rhetoric to that of philosophy, Schlegel remained in line with the earlier tradition by preserving Socrates as the paradigmatic ironist. In his *Philosophical Fragments* he writes that 'Philosophy is the real homeland of irony, which one would like to define as logical beauty … There is also a rhetorical species of irony which … has an excellent effect, especially in polemics … But compared to the sublime urbanity of the Socratic muse, it is like the pomp of the most splendid oration set over against the noble style of an ancient tragedy.'[49] Again, here we can see how Schlegel set the stage for all the later reflections on irony: these will now belong primarily to the field of philosophy, while retaining an essential connection to the figure of Socrates.

The expression "logical beauty," quoted in the last paragraph, perhaps best characterizes Schlegel's understanding of irony. In order to understand this expression, we have to make reference to another passage from the *Fragments*. Immediately after the passage above, Schlegel claims that 'Irony is the form of paradox. Paradox is everything simultaneously good and great.'[50] If irony is logical beauty and has the form of paradox, it follows that paradox is the form of the logically beautiful. As puzzling as this can sound, it makes sense if we see it in the light of the

[45] Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 56. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, 6.2.15: 'Cum etiam vita universa ironiam habere videatur, qualis est visa Socratis.' (original Latin)
[46] Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, p. 182.
[47] Richard, *The Romantic Conception of Life*, pp. 111-2.
[48] Friedrich Schlegel, *Literary Notebooks. 1797-1801* (Toronto: Toronto University press, 1957), quoted in Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, p. 183.
[49] Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 5.
[50] Ibid., p. 6.

Romantic view of reality. As Gaschè notices in his introduction to Schlegel's *Fragments*, 'the goal [of Romanticism] is to have done with [metaphysical] partition and division … but … the originality of the romantic position consisted in arguing that such completion could always be achieved only in a singular and finite way.'[51] Irony is what allows the Romantic to reach his goal, which nonetheless can only be achieved and expressed through the singular and finite perspective of the ironist. He longs for the infinite beyond any separation and category, and can in fact grasp it amidst the flux of fragmented being. However, the ironist cannot portray the Absolute, not even to himself: all he can do is to reflect indirectly the infinite unity of the Absolute in the finite and complex unity of all beings. This unity is paradoxical insofar as the diverse opposites present in reality are brought together, and because of the armony reached thereby, it is considered to be logically beautiful by its proponents. Therefore, the ironist contemplates the Absolute by the means of uniting reality in the form of the paradox.[52] However, this unity is still not objectively given, insofar as it appears only to the ironist from his point of view – that is, while he lives irony out.

According to Schlegel, the ironist can perform the task of bringing about this paradoxical unity as 'Socratic irony is the only involuntary and yet completely deliberate dissimulation … In this sort of irony, everything should be playful and serious, guilelessly open and deeply hidden … It contains and arouses a feeling of *indissoluble antagonism* between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication.'[53] As we can see, in Schlegel the rhetorical ability of saying one thing while meaning the other is translated into an attitude toward reality. The ironist claims to be able to grasp the infinite even though strictly speaking this is a conscious lie, insofar as he is able to do so only in a mediated way. The Absolute and the relative stand in opposition to one another, but precisely inasmuch as this 'antagonism' is 'indissoluble,' the ongoing opposition between the Absolute and the relative makes the former evident, as it comes to the fore because of its opposition to the relative. Although opposed to it, the Absolute is indissolubly tied to the relative, and in this they form a unity which is paradoxical. The ironist lives by his faith and longing for the complete communication of the Absolute, while knowing perfectly the desperate nature of such an enterprise, insofar as the Absolute can be

[51] Rodolphe Gasché, 'Foreword: Ideality in Fragmentation,' in ibid., pp. x-xi.
[52] In this sense, we can perhaps understand Schlegel's expression 'logical beauty' as 'logical harmony.' Beauty is the paradoxical harmony of reality attained by the ironist.
[53] Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, p. 13. [italics mine]

communicated only indirectly and by reference to its conflict with the relative. Accordingly, with Romanticism the ironist becomes able to keep existentially together the divergent and opposite elements of reality. While Schlegel calls irony 'the clear consciousness of eternal agility'[54] this consciousness does not translate to a non-committed existence. Far from resulting in a quietistic stance, the necessity of complete communication of the Absolute paradoxically held together with its impossibility, shapes Romantic irony as an effort of critically holding together the two sides of an opposition.[55] As Muecke put it, the ironist recognizes the world as 'infinitely complex and contradictory,' while not retreating from the task and responsibility of giving the world meaning and value.[56]

Though Friedrich Schlegel was the leading explorer and expositor of irony among German Romantics, there were other voices within the movement who contributed to the redefinition of the meaning of this concept. Among those whose work is relevant in this context, we find Friedrich's brother August Wilhelm Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck and Karl Solger.[57] Moreover, as we leave the Romantics behind and set to explore Kierkegaard's work on irony in his doctoral thesis, we have to reckon the influence of Hegel's work – both on the discussion around the nature of irony and on Kierkegaard's thought at that stage in his life. In some way, Hegel is responsible for bridging the Romantics to the later philosophical tradition and to Kierkegaard in particular. Holding a negative view of the Romantics, Hegel framed his criticism of their concept of irony focusing primarily on the work of Friedrich Schlegel. However, it must be noticed that Hegel had no direct knowledge of Friedrich Schlegel's discussion of irony. Instead, he was acquainted with 'August Wilhelm Schlegel's much more limited and simplified concept of irony … it was in *his* sense of the term that Hegel (and, following him, Kierkegaard) understood and attacked Romantic Irony.'[58] Having said this, we can now turn to Kierkegaard's doctoral thesis and to the concept of irony there expressed.

1.3 Irony across the Ages: Hegel and Kierkegaard's Doctoral Thesis

[54] Ibid., p. 100.
[55] Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, p. 200.
[56] Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, p. 215.
[57] Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, p. 19.
[58] Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, p. 183.

As I have previously mentioned, Lear is dismissive of the value of Kierkegaard's 1841 work *On the Concept of Irony;* he regards as negligible the influence of this work on Kierkegaard's mature understanding and practice of irony. As he put it, 'that book was literally a student thesis: Kierkegaard wrote it for his *Magister* degree. The mature Kierkegaard came to think of it as the misguided view of a very young man.'[59] As far as Kierkegaard's autobiographical considerations go, Lear is correct: Kierkegaard did come to look his doctoral thesis negatively, and in particular he was self-critical of the work's overly Hegelian character.[60] However, from the point of view of the development of Kierkegaard's thought, I argue that many of the seeds of Kierkegaard's later writings were already contained in his doctoral thesis.[61] In this respect, I believe that *The Concept of Irony* is crucial to any attempt to study Kierkegaard's understanding of irony, and I also hold that we can use this text to elucidate Lear's own work. I will now outline Kierkegaard's early work on irony; to do so, I shall also briefly outline Hegel's critique of Romanticism, insofar as this mediated the work of Schlegel to Kierkegaard.

Insofar as he was critical of the Romantic movement and of its conception of irony, Hegel tried to rehabilitate Socratic irony by disengaging it from Schlegel's interpretation.[62] He praised Socrates's own form of irony as a limited but necessary part of the Spirit's development, subsequently turning Socratic irony into one of the stages of his system. Thus, Hegel augmented irony's metaphysical weight, while at the same time declaring it to be just the negative moment within the movement of the Absolute Spirit. In this, Hegel was influenced not just by August Schlegel's account of the ideas of his brother Friedrich, but also by the Romantic philosopher Karl Solger, whose ideas on irony Hegel developed and used against Romanticism itself. As Kierkegaard reports, Hegel thought that Solger developed irony into a proper philosophical principle, while he thought of irony "in general" as a 'celebrated hobgoblin with aristocratic pretentions.'[63] According to Solger, the ironist's subjective refusal of any one-sided commitment

[59] Lear, *Irony*, p. x.
[60] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: with Continual Reference to Socrates* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. xii.
[61] For my interpretation of Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* I am indebted to Kevin Newmark's analysis in his *Irony on Occasion: from Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and De Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), pp. 40-3.
[62] Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 71. Hegel's judgements on Socrates and the Romantics can be found in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).
[63] G. W. F. Hegel, *Über 'Solger's nachgelassene Schriften*,' quoted in english in English in Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 308.

in favor of a broader perspective wherein opposites stand in an indissoluble and paradoxical harmonious opposition, was a stance that also found a footing in extra-personal reality. In other words, while Schlegel conceived irony as a way of life to be upheld in the face of reality, for Solger the ironist's stance mirrors a feature of the world itself. In his view, both the ironist and the world always remain partially unrevealed – something of them always remaining as it were above the flux of things.[64] Just like human nature, also the flux of finite things strives for the infinite. Therefore, this means that the ironist and the world "behave" in an analogous way: they both strive for reaching that which is above and beyond the flux of being. This makes the ironist's search for the infinite both a mimesis and a part of the world's own progress towards the Absolute. Accordingly, with Solger it is not just that irony can be a way of life: reality itself is ironic, and irony is now the center of life insofar as we are part of reality.[65]

Hegel accepts this view and transforms irony in the negative moment of his system.[66] Hence, the ironist's capacity to turn to what is above and beyond reality becomes the capacity to question and negate his own spiritual environment – that is, the culture, religion, and philosophy of his age. As Newmark put it, 'irony, as negativity, characterizes the coming to consciousness of subjectivity through the subject's original capacity to turn away from – and therefore to negate – all else.'[67] In other words, irony is the negative moment that allows us to become aware of the possibility of progress and history by negating the current expression of the Absolute Spirit, thereby making room for a new one. Thus, with Hegel irony grows beyond individual subjectivity, becoming the universal irony of world history, and the necessary negation of the current "spiritual state of affairs" which opens up the possibility for a new stage in the history of the Absolute Spirit.[68] Subsequently, the ironist becomes the representative of the Absolute Spirit as history prepares to move on.

Hegel (like Kierkegaard) understands Socrates as the first to question the eternal rules which the Greek blindly obeyed.[69] In this sense, Socrates manifests humanity's discovery of its

[64] Norman Cox, 'Irony,' p. 630.
[65] Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic*, p. 25.
[66] 'the thought that appeals to me most is that Solger was a sacrifice to Hegel's positive system.' See Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 323.
[67] Newmark, *Irony on Occasion*, p. 44.
[68] Cox, 'Irony,' pp. 631-2.
[69] Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 71.

capacity for self-awareness and reflection. However, the ironist's agency sets in motion only the negative part of the process, which alone cannot bring about the new age of the Spirit: 'the ironic subject remains too particular, and therefore capricious, in its philosophical comportment. Ultimately, such a subject must learn to accept objective limits for itself so as to prepare for an affirmative content integrating its limited particularity with the unlimited universality of the idea.'[70] In other words, the ironist can make room for a new age, but the latter's arrival comes at the expense of the ironist absorption into it.

Following Hegel, Kierkegaard defines irony as 'infinite absolute negativity.'[71] According to Alexander Nehamas, irony is infinite in the sense that it is not directed against the validity of some particular phenomena within a certain culture, but against that culture itself; 'it is "negative" because it undermines what it opposes but is incapable of offering any serious alternative to it … it is "absolute" because it negates what is actual by means of an implicit appeal to a future that, in a Hegelian sense, represents a higher stage of development.'[72] Kierkegaard also follows Hegel in differentiating Socratic irony from Romantic irony, claiming that the former was "good" insofar as it was "timely" – that is, that it met the needs of the historical moment in which it was originated – while in turn, he considered Romantic irony as uncommitted playfulness, a negativity that serves to no use whatsoever.[73] However, Hegel believes that Socrates's ignorance had a positive content insofar as in his ignorance Socrates still knew something – that is, that he was ignorant. Against Hegel, Kierkegaard holds that Socrates's knowledge of his ignorance is no proper knowledge at all.[74] As he put it, 'Even skepticism always posits something, whereas irony, … continually makes the very tantalizing attempt to eat up everything first of all thereupon to eat up itself .'[75] In other words, Kierkegaard claims that the ironist's ignorance compares to a bottomless emptiness where no solid ground can be found.

I will now focus on a passage at the beginning of his doctoral dissertation, where Kierkegaard employs a pictorial metaphor to express the nature of irony. Here Kierkegaard draws a connection between the concepts of irony and emptiness. I believe that this lends Kierkegaard's

[70] Newmark, *Irony on Occasion*, p. 45.
[71] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 261.
[72] Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 71.
[73] Newmark, *Irony on Occasion*, p. 47.
[74] Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, p. 211.
[75] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 56.

doctoral thesis a strong degree of originality, allowing him to hit upon aspects of irony not emphasized by any of the previous interpreters. Moreover, in the next chapter I shall argue that a similar connection between irony and nothingness can also be found in Lear. This is the passage in question:

> 'There is a work that represents Napoleon's grave. Two tall trees shade the grave. There is nothing else to see in the work, and the unsophisticated observer sees nothing else. Between the two trees there is an empty space; as the eye follows the outline, suddenly Napoleon himself emerges from this nothing, and now it is impossible to have him disappear again. Once the eye has seen him, it goes on seeing him with an almost alarming necessity. So also with Socrates's [ironic] rejoinders. One hears his words in the same way one sees the trees; his words mean what they say, just as the trees are trees, There is not one single syllable that gives a hint of any other interpretation, just as there is not one single line that suggests Napoleon, and yet this empty space, this nothing, is what hides that which is most important.'[76]

As we can see, Kierkegaard traces a parallel between Socrates's rejoinders and the effect of a figure suddenly popping out of the background while we stare at the picture of a landscape. Crucially, when trying to understand Kierkegaard's reasons for using this metaphor, we have to consider how this is contained within a discussion of Xenophon's portrait of Socrates. In fact, the whole passage is meant to discuss those aspects of Socratic irony which Xenophon missed. Kierkegaard criticizes Xenophon's treatment of Socrates because of his failure to portray the two essential elements of Socratic irony. The first element is 'situation,' the second is Socrates' 'rejoinders.'[77] A little further on, Kierkegaard adds that 'Socratic questioning is clearly … analogous to the negative in Hegel, except that the negative, according to Hegel is a necessary element in thought itself, is a determinant *ad intra* [inwardly]; in Plato [and therefore in Socrates],[78] the negative is made graphical and placed outside the object in the inquiring

[76] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 19.
[77] Ibid., p. 19.
[78] Here Kierkegaard is making reference to Plato's early dialogues, which he understands to be a relatively accurate portrayal of Socrates's person.

individual.'[79] These two ways of conceiving the negative give way to two modes of leading philosophical inquiry. In the first case,

> 'one can ask with the intention of receiving an answer containing the desired fullness, and hence the more one asks, the deeper and more significant becomes the answer; or [in the second case,] one can ask without any interest in the answer except to suck out the apparent content by means of the question and thereby to leave an emptiness behind. … The first method presupposes … that there is a plenitude; the second that there is an emptiness. … Just as Socrates's philosophy began with the presupposition that he knew nothing, so it ended with the presupposition that human beings know nothing at all.'[80]

Thus, Kierkegaard argues that situation and rejoinders are the essential elements of Socratic irony. On top of this, Socrates's questioning presupposes an emptiness in knowing. This emptiness is not simply epistemic – that is, a "simple" lack of knowledge – but rather it is an emptiness of an existential sort, otherwise called ignorance: Socrates embraced this ignorance and developed this attitude into irony.[81] This led him to reveal the same sort of emptiness in his interlocutors. We can see how Kierkegaard in his doctoral thesis manages to synthesize the two great traditions of thought on irony. On the one hand, his interest in Socrates's style of questioning seems to revive interests typical of the rhetorical and pre-Romantic reflection on irony. On the other hand, he articulates these interests in the context of the Romantic and post-Romantic approaches, thereby continuing to see irony as a way of life and as having metaphysical features.

In his *Irony on Occasion*, Kevin Newmark argues that irony has an inherently negative character. Because of this, 'irony has need of something else on which it might produce its negative effects. That would be the occasion of irony. If irony happens, then it can happen only on occasion.'[82] In Kierkegaard's terms, the negative is in the inquiring subject – irony is parasitic on an object to negate – and in this sense, the claims to knowledge made by Socrates's interlocutors are the occasions that he necessarily needs for exercising his irony through his rejoinders. Socrates's irony strikes his partners-in-dialogue as an unexpected turn of events, disrupting the flow of their speech and changing the direction of the argument – as it were, irony makes

[79] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, p. 35.
[80] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, pp. 36-7.
[81] It must be noticed that according to Kierkegaard this is a full-time commitment.
[82] Newmark, *Irony on Occasion*, p. 8.

Euthyphro and Callicles end up in places they were not heading for when they began talking. We can see this if we consider how, when questioned about anything, Socrates' interlocutors always engage in a well-exercised and reliable chain of arguments about what they believe is the correct definition of a particular concept – e.g., love, piety, courage, etc. . While doing so, they feel that they can safely move from premise A to conclusion B. Socrates's irony disrupts their trains of thought. In this sense, the occasion of irony is the cause of irony, but it must be specified that it stands as an accidental cause.[83] In other words, it causes irony, but it neither meant to do so, nor had at any moment irony as its foreseeable result. Accordingly, we could picture the chains of thoughts which irony disrupts as based on a "metaphysics of causality," namely one where foreseeable effects follow orderly from their causes.[84] This metaphysics represent an environment where everything is regular and tested, and certain causes always lead to certain effects. Irony interrupts this metaphysics, breaking down its environment.

We can now see why Kierkegaard links Socrates's rejoinders to the image of Napoleon suddenly emerging in a picture. Here the picture can be likened to the arguments and claims to knowledge advanced by Socrates' opponents. Everything seems regular in them, there are no surprises, and no other interpretations are suggested by the lines of the picture except for the very picture that they compose. Suddenly, from what seemed to be an empty space, the head of Napoleon appears: this is the occasion which allows for Napoleon's figure to emerge; the picture is thereby transformed irreversibly – 'out of the nothingness ... the necessity of Napoleon's image will appear.'[85] Of course, in a way the picture is still the same as before: and yet, having become aware of it, the observer cannot simply decide to ignore the existence of Napoleon's head.

We can think of ignorance as the existential equivalent of the empty space in the picture, out of which the head of Napoleon emerges: as we see this emptiness within us, we can embrace it as Socrates did and become ironists, making it our task to reveal the emptiness of ignorance in others. In the present context, to see our own ignorance and to work on it in order to make some sort of image out of it, is to take up the philosophical life. To actually spot this emptiness in somebody else is in fact what gives the ironist the occasion to bring forth his rejoinders, something which will make his target aware of his own ignorance and allow irony to happen. This is true both

[83] Newmark, *Irony on Occasion*, p. 3.
[84] Ibid., p. 11.
[85] Ibid., pp. 58-9.

in the sense that the ironist is allowed to carry out his practice, and also in the sense that his target is in a situation of irony, insofar as he suffers the interruption of his normal existential representations. To practice irony is to embrace that emptiness which is our ignorance, and then to become able spot it in others. However, irony as an interruption of naturalistic metaphysics is both this emptiness itself, and to be ourselves in that emptiness. This condition is what eventually led to the appearance of "Napoleon's head" within us.[86] This manifestation, according to Newmark, is the 'revealing [of] more picture and more subjective picture,'[87] in the sense that we come to articulate ourselves in the direction of a richer subjectivity – in the metaphor's terms, a human figure emerges where "only" a landscape was present. Irony is what helps us structure and deepen our personality and our understanding of reality. Hence, Kierkegaard not only integrates the interests and the results of the rhetoric and of the Romantic accounts of irony. He also takes a step forward by clearly linking irony to the development of our selves towards into an augmented subjectivity.

1.4) Pierre Hadot on Philosophy and Spiritual Exercises

Before we continue with our main argument and move to Jonathan Lear's account of irony, I would like to briefly develop some of the themes I raised in the introduction. In particular, I would like to take some space to discuss Pierre Hadot's ideas. In particular, I will argue that Hadot's category of "spiritual exercises" does include the practice of Socratic irony. Hence, this section shall serve as a short "methodological supplement" to my discussion of Lear, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, insofar as I will lay down the ground for discussing their practice of Socratic irony as instances of spiritual exercises, and their approach to philosophy as different varations on the theme of "philosophy as a way of life."

As already mentioned, Pierre Hadot argued that philosophy originally neither consisted nor was conceived exclusively as an abstract exercise in the realm of theory. On the contrary, it was an existential attitude, the expression of a devotion to wisdom and of one's commitment to live a wise existence. The *philo-sophos*, a friend or lover of wisdom, was someone who was not a sage

[86] Newmark, *Irony on Occasion*, p. 54.
[87] Ibid., p. 54.

yet – that is, a *sophos* – but who nonetheless strove to become a sage by seeking wisdom and to be transformed by it. According to Hadot, this view was the "common" conception of philosophy held by all philosophical schools at the time ancient Greek and Roman civilizations.[88] A similar perspective remained dominant in Europe well beyond the Medieval age – with Christian thinkers considering theology as their own equivalent of the philosophy of the ancients, Christ being the wisdom to be sought after.[89]

As Hadot put it, 'philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory – much less in the exegesis of texts – but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence.'[90] Of course, theory and abstract reasoning did find a place in the ancients' understanding of philosophy. However, they did not play such an exclusive role as they often do nowadays: in the perspective of the ancients, 'theory is never considered an end in itself; it is clearly and decidedly put in the service of practice.'[91] A clear instance of such a conception can be found in the Stoic school. Famously, the Stoics divided philosophy into three fields: logic, physics, and ethics. Often, writes Hadot, interpreters misunderstand this point and take the Stoics to divide philosophy into two parts: a theoretical-discursive one comprising physics and logic, and a practical one corresponding to ethics. By contrast, the Stoics divided in three fields *the whole* of philosophy, where each of these could be considered both from a practical and from a theoretical point of view.[92] When considered from a theoretical point of view, logic, physics, and ethics provide us with theories and principles about their respective fields of inquiry. The products of these disciplines are then supposed to be turned in practical rules of conduct. From the practical point of view 'we are no longer concerned with theoretical logic – that is, the theory of correct reasoning – rather, we are concerned not to let

[88] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 57-9. Hadot does not consider this conception of philosophy as an exclusive province of ancient Greek and Roman thought. For instance, Hadot employs the example of Buddhist practices as a useful comparison to Greek ones. Furthermore, although he does not follow Dodds in holding that Greek spiritual practices have their roots in shamanic traditions, he agrees with him that they predated the age of classic Greek philosophy.

[89] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 128-30. According to the Church Fathers, each Greek philosopher was in possession of one portion of the *Logos*, whereas Christians were in possession of the *Logos* itself as incarnated in Jesus Christ. Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 7, 7, 7: 'if someone had arisen who could collect the truth scattered and dispersed among the individual philosophers and sects and reduce it to one body, that one […] would not disagree with us.'

[90] Ibid., p. 83.

[91] Ibid., p. 60.

[92] Ibid., pp. 191-2.

ourselves be deceived in our everyday lives by false representations.'[93] In other words, the fruits of speculation and theoretical research were meant to be absorbed by the philosopher, helping him to move into a life of wisdom and out of one of foolishness and ignorance; ideally we should apply perfect theoretical knowledge to life, thereby giving birth to a perfectly accomplished existence.

The aim of absorbing one's school teachings structured the philosophical life as a perpetually renewed act aimed at transforming ourselves.[94] This "philosophical act" 'is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to be more fully, and makes us better.'[95] Subsequently, in order to promote their practitioners' transformation, the ancient schools formulated a number of practices, which Hadot labels 'spiritual exercises.' These exercises aimed to lead to 'a transformation of our vision of the world, and to a metamorphosis of our personality.'[96] According to Hadot, all spiritual exercises – at least in the context of ancient Greece – find their inspiration and foundation in the Delphic maxim 'know thyself.' On his interpretation, this maxim is an invitation to establish a relationship 'of the self to the self,' in order to gain insight into our essential being and true moral state. To first establish this relationship is to undergo a sort of philosophical conversion, a reorientation of our existence according to the path of the philosopher and the beginning of the process of healing from our lack of wisdom; to nurture this relationship is to enact and to persevere in the practice of spiritual exercises – it is to know myself 'qua non-sage: that is, not as a *sophos*, but as a *philo-sophos*, someone on the way toward wisdom.'[97]

In his introduction to *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Davidson writes that the spiritual exercises of the ancients were 'spiritual because they involved the entire spirit, one's whole way of being.'[98] These exercises could take the form of exercises of the imagination, of writing personal diaries, of prolonged study and meditation on one's school's authoritative texts. What they all held in common, was that they were meant to 'ensure spiritual progress toward the ideal state of wisdom … for the soul, analogous to the athlete's training or to the application of a medical cure.'[99] I hold

[93] Ibid., pp. 191-2.
[94] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 265.
[95] Ibid., p. 83.
[96] Ibid., p. 82.
[97] Ibid., p. 90.
[98] Arnold I. Davidson, 'Introduction,' in Ibid., p. 21.
[99] Ibid., p. 59.

that Socratic, Romantic, and Hegelian varieties of irony all fit into Hadot's understanding of philosophy. In different ways, they all operate as means which help the Socratic, Romantic, and Hegelian philosopher to absorb his school's teachings – whether that means coming to see one's own ignorance, manifesting the Absolute through the fragmentariness of existence, or ascending to the higher stages of the system. Insofar as Lear, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard all inherit their use of irony from this line of thinking that originates with Socrates and reaches them through the mediation of the Romantics and Hegel, I think we can conclude that their use of irony shall also be an instance of what Hadot calls spiritual exercises.

Chapter 2) On Irony, Therapy and Love: Jonathan Lear's psycho-philosophical synthesis and the goal of the philosophical life

2.1 Kierkegaard's and Plato's Influence on Lear's "Case" for Irony

I shall now turn my attention to Jonathan Lear's own account of Socratic irony. As mentioned above, Lear grounds his reading on an entry taken from Kierkegaard's journals and on an extract from Plato's *Symposium*. These texts serve two distinct purposes: on one hand, Kierkegaard inspires Lear to read irony as an essential trait of what it means to live a human existence; on the other hand, Plato's dialogue provides him with his prime example of what experiencing irony looks and feels like. I will follow the order of Lear's exposition, and begin by assessing Kierkegaard's influence on his case for irony.

We have seen how Lear holds that 'irony is revealed neither by a majority vote of those who use the term nor by a glimpse of a transcendent idea, but by a grasp of what matters when it comes to living a distinctively human life.'[100] The idea that achieving a distinctively human life is something difficult, is a mainstay of Lear's work well beyond his thoughts concerning irony. As noted by Riker and Robert, the idea that the ego and a well-structured world are never "automatically given" underpins Lear's work since his 1990 book *Love and its Place in Nature*. In this respect, Lear claims that our ego and world both must always be achieved through the

[100] Lear, *Irony*, p. ix.

subject's efforts. In this respect, the opposite of an "achieved ego" are psychotics and infants who have neither functional egos, nor organized worlds.[101] In a more recent work, published in 2017 under the title *Wisdom won from Illness: Essays in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, he specifies this theme further writing that 'our humanity – not merely the biological species *human* but what makes human life distinctive and valuable – partially consists in wrestling both individually and communally, with what these values mean and how they actually fit into a life well lived.'[102] In *A Case for Irony*, Lear explicitly connects the theme of achieving our ego and its world to irony and the task of living a distinctively human excellence. In this book, he also discusses the Kierkegaardian origin of his understanding of humanity as something that has to be striven for.

In a journal entry dated December 3, 1854, Kierkegaard writes that 'To become human does not come that easily.'[103] At first, such a claim might sound ridiculous as one could argue that either one is born human or is not. Accordingly, it seems that humanity is either an automatic or an impossible quality to have, insofar as being human appears to be a matter of either being or not being, and not one of becoming. Lear is quick to acknowledge the apparent ridiculousness of Kierkegaard's claim; nevertheless, he argues that in his statement we find exemplified an attitude typical of a certain philosophical tradition which, writes Lear, 'conceives of humanity as a task.'[104] From this point of view 'being human involves not just being a member of the species but living up to an ideal. Being human is thus linked to a conception of human excellence; and thus becoming human requires getting good at being human.'[105] According to Lear, Kierkegaard presents the practice of irony as a means for accomplishing the task of becoming human. Moreover, Lear interprets Kierkegaard's use of pseudonyms as an expression of his ironic method. In other words, Kierkegaard was concerned with the condition of his readers in relationship to the full attainment of their humanity.[106] Crucially, Lear argues that the fact that he was not content with just reading Socrates, but that he tried to "apply" him, sets Kierkegaard aside from all other modern interpreters

[101] John Riker and Thomas Robert, 'Jonathan Lear: a Psychoanalytic Ontology,' *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/teo0000044, p. 2 [accessed on the 29th of October 2016].
[102] Jonathan Lear, *Wisdom won from Illness: Essays in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 15.
[103] Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journal and Papers*, vol. 2, ed. H. V. Hong and E. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 278.
[104] Lear, *Irony*, p. 3.
[105] Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, p. 3.
[106] Lear, *Irony*, pp. x-xi.

of irony. As Lear put it, 'for Kierkegaard what it is to learn from Socrates is not to write an academic treatise explaining the marks and features of Socratic irony; it is to be *ironic* in the service of helping oneself and one's readers to move in the direction of virtue. Thus … we have the creation of pseudonymous authors who go on to write (or edit) their own ironic and Humourous texts. The aim of these texts is not to *explain* irony, but to *instill* it.'[107]

Kierkegaard understands irony as something that permeates the whole of Socrates's existence. So he claims that '[Socrates's] whole existence is and was irony; whereas the entire contemporary population of farm hands and business men and so on … were perfectly sure of being human and knowing what it means to be a human being, Socrates … occupied himself with the problem – what does it mean to be a human being? … Socrates doubted that one is a human being by birth.'[108] As we can see, in a way analogous to the Romantics, Kierkegaard here moves away from an understanding of irony which privileges the analysis of rhetorical skill. In turn, he interprets irony as something that encompassed the whole of Socrates's existence, and which consisted in questioning whether all it takes to live a distinctively human life is to be born as a member of the human species. Following his reading of Kierkegaard, Lear puts irony on the center of the stage of our struggle for a distinctively human life.

In the preface to *A Case for Irony*, Lear describes irony as 'a little disruptor[109] [which] is crucial to the human condition.'[110] This disruptor affects the way we routinely understand ourselves within the social context we inhabit and with respect to our ideals. Drawing his terminology from Kierkegaard, Lear chooses to call these routine self-understandings 'pretenses.' In this regard, Lear notes how in Kierkegaard "to pretend" must be taken 'in the older sense of [*putting*] *oneself forward* or *make a claim*.'[111] Under this meaning of pretending we can read our whole practical identity – that is, how we identify ourselves from an ethical point of view – as a pretense. Furthermore, insofar as having a practical identity is a common feature of human beings

[107] Ibid., pp. x-xi.
[108] Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, p. 278.
[109] For reasons that shall hopefully become clear over the course of the exposition, I suggest we give to 'disruptor' the same definition that Jonathan Lear adopts to explain what he means by *break*: 'I give the generic name *break* to all types of mental activity that serve to disrupt – or break apart – the ordinary functionings of the mind … break is a genus concept, not a species … breaks can come from inside as well as from outside the individual mind … a person can become active with respect to break.' Jonathan Lear, *Wisdom won from Illness*, pp. 164-5.
[110] Lear, *Irony*, p. ix.
[111] Ibid., p. 10.

– and one that we could hardly hope of completely excluding from our self-awareness – to 'pretend' or to build and maintain a practical identity must be understood as a way of being in the world which is both fundamental and basic to what it means to be human.

In this respect, Lear writes that 'even our simplest acts are regularly embedded in our sense of who we are.'[112] In this regard, we always live under a certain practical identity. According to Christine M. Korsgaard – from whose work Lear extracts his understanding of what counts as a practical identiy – a practical identity is 'a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.'[113] Thus, for each human being there will be a practical identity that matches our pretense, that is a description under which one values oneself according to one's whole personality. Similarly, there will be as many practical identities as our pretenses are. From this, we can deduce that there is no moment when we stop pretending, as to do so would prevent us from accomplishing even the simplest of acts, and in general from inhabiting the world in the way a human being does. We can build on Lear's description of pretenses and practical identies and make the subsequent claims: 1) life as a human being requires a sustained commitment to the act of existence *as such* – that is, a commitment to be in the world as the openness preliminary to any particular way of being in the world, and as the constant holding together of my existence. Furthermore, 2) life as a human being requires a sustained commitment to exist in all the particular situations which make up the "concrete" content of my existence. Accordingly, we can distinguish between a general act of pretending as being-in-the-world, which is simultaneously and instantiated in a multiplicity of particular pretenses as being-in-a-particular-existential-context. It must also be noted, that to put oneself forward is also to pretend for our own benefit, as we can have a sense of who we are only by making ourselves the object of our own self-reflection. As Charles Taylor puts it, 'To be human is to be … engaged in living … an interpretation of oneself and one's aspirations' – that is, one's own self-image and ideals.[114] However, this requires that we are able to "contemplate" our own self-descriptions or pretenses. In fact, this is what allows Socrates and his followers to subject themselves to self-irony, as they apply their "tools" to their own identities.

[112] Ibid., p. 11.
[113] Lear, *Irony*, p. 4.
[114] Charles Taylor, 'Self-Interpreting Animals,' in *Human Agency and Language*, p. 75.

Our social pretense becomes our routine insofar as it forms the self-understanding we live by on a day-to-day basis. In this respect, Lear claims that 'the possibility of irony arises when a gap opens between a certain pretense as it is made available in a particular social practice and an aspiration or ideal which, on the one hand, is embedded in the pretense … but which, on the other hand seems to transcend the life and the social practice in which that pretense is made.'[115] Hence, each social pretense contains in it some sort of socially established ideal or vision of human excellence, which presumably plays the role of setting a pretense's goals and tenets. However, there are times when we realize that our routine does not express that ideal on which the pretense relies. On these occasions we realize how we are falling short of living what our pretense is all about, that is, its ideal of virtuosity and human excellence. At this point, irony disrupts our practical identity by exposing this gap, thus making room for a reconstruction of our practical identity in a form more truthful to its ideal. Applying the distinction between pretending in a general and in a particular way, we can distinguish between a general striving for living a distinctively human life – in Hadot's term, we could describe it as the striving for wisdom – and the way in which this striving takes a concrete shape in the different ideals of human excellence that we develop within the context of our particular pretenses. In this way, we obtain that striving for a human life appears both as an overarching goal of our practical life, and as the contextual goal of our different particular pretenses – therefore, excelling at being scholars, athletes, husbands, become part of our general striving for achieving wisdom and a distinctively human life.

As different societies contain different social roles, different social pretenses will be available in each of them. Insofar as these pretenses communicate different aspects of a society's understanding of what human excellence is, they are all different takes on what it is to achieve a human life. Hence, the occasion for irony arises when we realize a gap between our present condition and our ideal of what it means to be human. Arguably, although this is not a step which Lear seems to take, to realize that we are "lacking in humanity" could even lead us to re-conceive not just a certain pretense, but also the ideal which gives shape to it. After all, if sometimes pretenses express a deluded understanding as regards our relationship to human excellence, this delusion might also engulf our understanding of what it is like to live a distinctively human life. For example, we might think that being born human is enough to fully live a distinctive human

[115] Lear, *Irony*, p. 11.

life, instead of seeing – as Kierkegaard seems to suggest – that this is just not good enough. Of course, in order to criticize a particular understanding of human excellence we would need some sort of criterion against which we could compare this form of life. For now, I shall leave the question of what such a criterion might be, insofar as this would force us to depart from our analysis of Lear's "case for irony."

2.2 The Experience of Irony

Let us now take a closer look at Lear's "phenomenology" of the experience of irony and to the way in which he draws upon Plato's discussion of the figure of Socrates. **Essentially, Lear argues that the experience of irony is a 'form of not being perfectly sure – an insecurity about being human that is … constitutive of becoming human.'**[116] Therefore, he who suffers the experience of irony is in some sense sure about the fact that he is human: after all, he belongs to the human species and he has some kind of access to human excellence insofar as this is manifested as the ideal of his pretense; at the same time, he realizes that he is not fully human, as he sees how he fails to fully live in a distinctively human way. This sense of unsureness is the outcome of the exercise of irony, what Lear calls its disrupting effect. Lear builds this understanding of the experience of irony by looking at an episode of Socrates's life, a well-known passage of the *Symposium*, where Alcibiades describes Socrates's behavior during the military campaign of Thrace:

> 'One day, at dawn, he started thinking about some problem or other; he just stood outside trying to figure it out. He could not resolve it, but he would not give up. He simply stood there, glued to the same spot. By midday, many soldiers had seen him and, quite mystified, they told everyone that Socrates had been standing there all day, thinking about something. He was still there when evening came, and after dinner some Ionians moved their bedding outside, where it was cooler and more comfortable (all this took place in the summer), but mainly in order to watch if Socrates was going to stay out there all night. And so he did; he stood on the very same spot until dawn! He only left next morning, when the sun came out, and he made his prayers to the new day.'[117]

We do not know exactly what problem troubled Socrates, and Alcibiades himself seems to suggest that this is not the point of his story. However, Lear suggests that this problem somehow involved Socrates's pretense. According to Lear, the reason why Socrates was standing still was that he was suffering irony's disruptive effect, wrestling with his sudden perception of his lack of

[116] Lear, *Irony*, p. 6.
[117] Plato, *Symposium*, ed. and trans. by K. J. Dover (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 220c-d.

human excellence. Earlier in the *Symposium* we find Socrates stopping under a porch while walking with Agathon and Aristodemus, and we are told that this is a quite common thing for him to do.[118] Standing by Lear's interpretation, this would be yet another instance of Socrates exposing himself to irony. Thus, the *Symposium* reinforces the picture of Socrates as someone whose life was permeated by the practice of irony. **In order to fully make sense of Lear's description of these moments of "stand-stillness" as experiences of unsureness concerning our own humanity, I shall retrace the different steps of Lear's argument in favor of this reading.**

First of all, Lear rejects the "traditional" definition of irony as the capacity to 'make some forms of witty remarks, perhaps saying the opposite of what he means, of remaining detached by undercutting any manifestation of seriousness,'[119] arguing instead that this is a 'derivative form [of irony].'[120] I take this to mean that Lear is not excluding that an experience of "proper irony" can indeed take place embedded within one of these "derivative forms" of irony. Nonetheless, Lear insists that conceiving irony "as witticism" does not get to the "true core" of the ironic experience. In order to unveil what this true core might be, he returns to the concept of pretense. We have already taken into consideration Lear's claim that 'the possibility of irony arises when a gap opens between pretense as it is made available in a social practice and an aspiration or ideal which, on the one hand is embedded in the pretense – indeed, which expresses what the pretense is all about – but which, on the other hand, seems to transcend the life and the social practice in which that pretense is made.'[121] Lear substantiates this claim by taking as an example the pretense of the teacher, which he defines as someone 'who can help his neighbors learn.'[122] In this sense, to teach is a particular form of pretending, governed by the ideal of helping others to learn.

As any other pretense, that of the teacher reveals itself in a number of social practices – that is, a set of socially recognized ways of behaving that are conducive to "helping one's own neighbors to learn." Of course, we will judge somebody's ability to teach depending on his capacity to carry out these social practices. Hence, if being a good teacher includes, say,

[118] Plato, *Symposium*, 174d-175b.
[119] Lear, *Irony*, p. 9.
[120] Ibid., p. 9.
[121] Ibid., p. 11.
[122] Ibid., p. 11.

the ability to develop a well-rounded reading list for an undergraduate course, then part of the process leading to the achievement of the ideal of the "teacher pretense" would include being able to develop such a reading list. Within this picture, irony occurs when the social practices sustaining a particular pretense stop being acknowledged as an obvious way of achieving the ideal embedded in that same pretense. In other words, the occasion for irony arises in the event that developing reading lists for undergraduate courses is suddenly put into question as an effectual way of teaching, and thereby of achieving excellence as a teacher. According to Lear, what happens in this situation is that 'in putting myself forward as a teacher – or, whatever the relevant practical identity – I simultaneously instantiate a determinate way of embodying the identity and fall dramatically short of the very ideals that I have, until now, assumed to constitute the identity.'[123]

Having come to this stage of his argument, Lear quickly points out a possible misunderstanding concerning the conditions necessary for irony to occur. That is, he specifies that we should not think that failure to instantiate a particular pretense is caused by an individual's hypocrisy – for instance, somebody who only simulates a genuine interest in teaching to others.[124] Instead, Lear argues that irony affects well-intentioned pretenders, people who genuinely wish to live up to their ideals. In this sense, we could say that someone who is hypocritically simulating commitment to a certain pretense is not really attempting to achieve the pretense's ideals. Subsequently, he cannot possibly fail to do so in a way which is susceptible of being ironically exposed, because he is not fully interested in whether or not he succeeds in this enterprise.

The importance of Lear's remarks on hypocrisy is best seen with reference to his following discussion of Kierkegaard's ironic stance towards Christendom – looking at which Lear aims to provide a second example of irony "done in practice." In this respect, Lear argues that when Kierkegaard tried to expose Christendom's contradiction, he was not worried with cases of hypocritical "Sunday believers." Rather, he was interested into people who sincerely and committedly tried to live a Christian life.[125] Accordingly, Lear claims that

[123] Lear, *Irony*, pp. 11-2.
[124] Ibid., p. 12.
[125] Ibid., p. 12.

when reading Kierkegaard we should not 'caricature Christendom'[126] as a collection of "fake Christians;" rather, we should understand Christendom as a complex socio-ideological construct which – among other things – included the ongoing struggle between the Roman Catholic and the Reformed churches, and Protestantism's fragmentation into sects.[127] This provides evidence of the fact that Christendom contained plenty of people who sincerely wished to be true Christians. Nonetheless, Kierkegaard ironically pointed out how all these people failed in their endeavors because of what was happening at the level of their social practices. In other words, if the ideal of the Christian pretense is "following Christ faithfully," the inhabitants of Christendom failed to live up to this ideal insofar as they lacked a proper understanding of the social practices necessary to make Christ-following a reality. In its essence, Kierkegaard's practice of irony hinges on the fact that his contemporaries take Christianity and the Christian faith for granted – that is, they believe that to be born in Christendom is enough to be considered Christians. The social practices and the modalities of relating to the ideal of Christian life that originate from this mentality are totally inappropriate to express Christianity existentially. In turn, Kierkegaard argues that a Christian life is something that must be achieved and that can never be taken for granted; in terms of the social practices that best describes the Christian existence, Kierkegaard identifies suffering in the name of the truth in imitation of Christ's own hardships.[128]

Articulating his analysis of Kierkegaard's ironic stance towards Christendom, Lear traces a distinction which is crucial to his account of the ironic experience. He differentiates between the existential paradigm shift that can ensue as the outcome of a genuine experience of irony, and the process of critical self-reflection that pretenses normally express within their own social practices. As Lear put it, if 'Christendom is the social pretense of Christianity, [that is] the *myiriad* ways in which the social world and its inhabitants put themselves forward as Christian,' and given that 'reflection and criticism [are] already part of the social practice … what we need to understand is how Kierkegaard's irony is not captured by any of these myriad forms or calls to self-consciousness.'[129] In other words, Lear

[126] Ibid., p. 12.
[127] Lear, *Irony*, p. 12.
[128] I shall discuss these topics in depth in the third chapter.
[129] Lear, *Irony*, p. 12.

claims that pretenses can deploy forms of reflection and criticism that remain "contained" within their own perimeter. As such, these patterns of self-consciousness are neither able nor intended to put into question the assumptions and parameters underpinning a particular pretense – for instance, the nature of Christianity as framed in Christendom. Another way of framing Lear's argument would be that, whatever the standard patterns of reflection expressed by a social pretense may be, these are not enough to expose the gap between our ideals and the way in which our social practices fall short of them. At least, they are incapable to have the same disruptive effect of irony. As Lear put it, 'irony … is the activity of bringing this falling short to light *in a way that is meant to grab us*.'[130] This means that normal patterns of self-reflection are unable to grab us in an ironic way – whatever else they may be able to do.

Therefore, we could say that what lacks in Christendom's processes of self-reflection in order for these to be called properly ironic, is the "shaking" quality of irony. These processes of self-reflection fail to make me reconsider the way in which I live my life as a Christian, so that all my received understandings of what it means to live a Christian life are put into question: as Lear put it 'it is as though Christianity has *come back* to show me that *everything* I have hitherto taken a Christian life to be is ersatz, a shadow. Even when I am pricked by conscience and experience myself falling short – that *entire package* I learned in Christendom bears at best a comical relation to what it would actually be to follow Jesus' teaching.'[131] In other words, if Lear is claiming that true irony is capable of putting into question all my social practices, by casting doubt on the paradigm within which I think my relationship to my ideal. Irony exposes our radical failure to live up to our ideals – that is, a failure that we cannot hope to mend with the resources provided by our social pretense as, 'irony breaks open a false world of possibilities by confronting one with a practical necessity. The form of this confrontation is disruption: disruption of my practical identity as a Christian, disruption of my practical knowledge of how to live as a Christian.'[132] We are now in the position to better define what Lear considers to be the core of the experience of irony: it is the experience of being shaken out of our normal way of relating to an ideal of human

[130] Lear, *Irony*, p. 13.
[131] Ibid., p. 14.
[132] Ibid., p. 15.

excellence, so that 'an abyss opens between our previous understanding and our dawning sense of an ideal to which we take ourselves already to be committed.'[133] Hence, irony comes to be configured as 'a peculiar species of uncanniness – in the sense that something that has been familiar returns to me as strange and unfamiliar. And in its return it disrupts my world.'[134]

This is the experience that Lear claims to find in the above-mentioned episode from the *Symposium*, where he argues that Socrates brought himself to a standstill through a self-application of irony. In this sense, it can be said that in this occasion Socrates suffered the same fate that famously occurred to his interlocutors – insofar as they were normally the one who ended up paralyzed by his dialectic. Accordingly, it follows that we can identify and further clarify Lear's description of ironic shakiness through the Greek word that Plato employs to describe the stillness caused by Socrates to his partners in dialogue. This condition of shakiness is perhaps best described in the *Meno*. In Meno's words, Socrates is likened to the 'flat torpedo sea-fish … [which] benumbs anyone who approaches and touches it.'[135] In Ancient Greek, this experience of being benumbed is what goes under the name of *a-poria*, 'an abstract noun composed of the *alpha privativum* and the noun *poros*, which means "a way through or over an impasse"'[136] – in other words, *aporia* is the condition of "waylessness." Experiences such as Meno's were those which prompted people to charge Socrates with *eironeia* – that is, with feigning ignorance in order to ask rather than to answer questions, in such a relentless way that he often got to the point of paralyzing those he interrogated. Hence, in the context of Plato's dialogues, to be in an aporetic situation is the consequence of falling prey to Socrates's irony. Accordingly, I think it is acceptable to employ the concept of *aporia* to make reference to Lear's description of the experience of irony, insofar as he aims to provide a faithful account of Socrates practice as an ironist.

Having come to this conclusion, it is necessary to add a corollary, before we continue with the main course of the exposition. As I have just discussed, Lear makes a clear

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[133] Lear, *Irony*, p. 15.
[134] Ibid., p. 15.
[135] Plato, *Meno*, ed. and trans. by R. W. Sharples (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 80a-b.
[136] Sean D. Kirkland, 'Thinking in the Between with Heidegger and Plato, *Research in Phenomenology*,' 37 (2007), p. 109.

distinction between irony and self-reflection. Nonetheless, we should notice that he himself blurs the separation between these two activities. In this regard, he comments that, 'if … Christendom were fairly obviously a rundown institution, then one might use a sentence like

(I) In all of Christendom, is there a Christian?[137]

in an absolutely straightforward reflection in which one steps back from the practices and questions them in the familiar way.'[138] In order to substantiate his claim, Lear takes as an example one of the pillars of Christian ethics, that is, the commandment of loving one's

[137] The question posed by Lear allows us to introduce another feature of the ironic experience. As we already know, to practice irony is to make someone insecure about whether or not he has achieved human excellence. Drawing on Kierkegaard, Lear likens this process to asking an ironic question. As regards the form of this question, Lear frames it as "among all Xs, is there any X?"; for example, as we already know, the ironic question that runs through Kierkegaard's work is 'among all Christians, is there a Christian?' (Lear, *Irony*, p. 12) The meaning of this question is: among all those who consider themselves to be an X, is there indeed someone who has truly achieved Xness? Accordingly, the ironist discloses a particular dimension of being human as something that has to be achieved, questioning if anyone in a particular context has accomplished such a feat. What is significant in the formulation of the ironic question is its apparent tautological character, which forces its recipients to question whether they are something, which they normally take for granted that they are. Again, in Kierkegaard's case this means forcing the Danish people – who consider themselves "natural-born Christians" – to consider whether they are indeed followers of Christ.
As mentioned in the first chapter, the possibility of irony arises when a gap opens between someone's pretense and his ideal. Hence, to ask an ironic question is not a matter of simply attacking, say, a Christian's hypocrisy and failure to realize the standards set by his faith. If this was the case, then irony would only be a matter of questioning someone's actual dedication to achieving the ideal of excellence set by a particular social context. Instead, the ironist wants to criticize the way in which a certain social context with its practices shapes this representation of human excellence. In other words, irony is not about exposing the cowardice of someone supposed to be courageous; instead, irony is about making this person wonder whether he has a clear idea of what it means to be courageous. From the perspective of the ironist, the matter concerns a particular social practice that, contrarily to what is commonly held, falls short of a particular ideal, thereby giving birth to a deficient pretense. (Lear, *Irony*, pp. 12-3) Kierkegaard's ironic question is neither about questioning the value of becoming a Christian, nor it is primarily concerned with the lack of commitment to the Gospel of particular Danish Christians. Instead, he is trying to provoke a question about whether the meaning of being a Christian is accurately spelled out in the context of the Danish Lutheran Church in particular, and of 19th century Christendom more broadly. In Lear's own words, -
'"among all the doctors, is there a doctor?" This question is not on its own sufficient or even necessary for the experience of irony that I am trying to isolate. One can use such a question in a standard act of reflection in which one "steps back" from day-to-day practices and considers how well or how badly they fit in with one's long-term commitment to promoting health. This, one might say, is a standard superego moment. I am concerned with a different kind of moment – perhaps a moment when such standard reflection gets a bit out of hand … you are no longer stepping back to reflect on the thought that it is a stunning idea; rather, you are stunned by the idea.'(Lear, *Wisdom won from Illness*, p. 68.)
What causes the ironic break is a sudden realization that there are other ways of looking to our ideals, angles and points of view that we had not previously considered. The idea of Christianity, of promoting health through medical practice, of being courageous, suddenly stop being familiar to us, and their new appearances prove to be shocking. Our habits are interrupted as we reconsider our social practices. I will give a further account of the ironic question in chapter 2.
[138] Lear, *Irony*, p. 13.

neighbor as oneself.[139] Further, he goes on to imagine somebody listening to a Sunday sermon on the topic of loving one's neighbors, and how often we fail to live up to this ideal; having left the church, the listener walks into a beggar asking for money. Irritated at first, the Christian reminds the sermon and gives the beggar some coins. To this gesture, the beggar comments 'you must be listening to your priest.'[140] Now, Lear claims that in this instance the Christian has in some way been ironized: the beggar's words allows him to realize he had been falling short of his ideal – and had he not heeded to the priest's sermon he would have persevered in his failure as a good Christian. Nonetheless, assuming that this scene is set within Christendom, Lear concludes that the Christian's realization of falling short of his ideals cannot be qualified as ironic, insofar as he has not left the perimeter of Christendom.[141] However, having substantiated his distinction between irony and in-pretense reflectivity through this example, Lear comments that occasionally even Christendom's capacity for self-reflection can express a '(restricted) version of irony.'[142] In this respect, Lear is essentially admitting that, in spite of not having left Christendom, our imaginary church-going friend has nonetheless experienced a limited degree of irony, to the extent in which he realized he was failing to live up to his ideals.

Crucially, the fact that Lear makes room for considering at least some form of self-reflection as restricted forms of irony decisively diminish the distance between irony and self-reflection. Now, the difference seems to be more concerning the position of the ironist – that is, whether or not he is standing within the same social pretense of the ironized individual – rather than the actual substance of the experience. Accordingly, just like Lear distinguishes between a proper and a restricted version of irony, I think that by analogy we should distinguish between a proper and a restricted version of *aporia*. On the one hand, we have a situation of "proper *aporia*" when all signposts are lost and we do not know how to go on pretending to be a Christian – therefore coming to a total standstill. On the other hand, we have a case of "restricted *aporia*" when somebody suffers a partial impasse in the way in which he normally lives his Christian life; nonetheless, this impasse is resolved without

[139] Lear, *Irony*, p. 14.
[140] Ibid., p. 14.
[141] Ibid., p. 14.
[142] Ibid., p. 14.

degenerate into a major crisis, insofar as it can be overcome employing the resources already possessed by the social pretense.

We must be careful not to think that Socrates's practice of irony aimed to cause disruption just for the sake of it. Crucially, Socrates claims in the *Meno* that 'if the torpedo is torpid itself while causing others to be torpid, I am like it but not otherwise. For it is not from any sureness in myself that I cause other to doubt: it is from being in more doubt than anyone else.'[143] In other words, Socrates exercises irony on others because he is in doubt himself about how much he has progressed in virtue, and is eager to share his uncertainty as well as his quest with others. Socrates's irony extends an invitation to his interlocutors in order to join him on his quest for achieving humanity – it is a way of sharing with fellow way-travelers the burden of this journey along the path of the philosophical life. This is possible insofar as, according to Iakovos Vasiliou, *aporia* 'ought to give a thoughtful interlocutor pause.'[144] Hence, Socrates' hope was that someone in a condition of *aporia* might review his understanding of what was at stake in the discussion. In this sense, *aporia* is always a condition of "waylessness" that presupposes an obstacle that blocks us from reaching a destination – which, in the context of Plato's dialogue, is usually the definition of some virtue, or perhaps the outlook of the life-ideal which embodies that virtue. To be suddenly unable to coherently articulate a picture of what it is like to be, say, pious, is the conceptual equivalent of finding our way blocked while walking toward a physical destination. In Lear's terms, this is to be unable to see how our pretense manifests its ideal, suddenly finding that the connection between the way we pretend and our pretense's ideal is now "blocked." However, even when the ironist causes us to be in *aporia* we do not stop pretending: instead, we try unsuccessfully to pretend. To pretend involves connecting our self-image to an ideal; however, irony cuts us off from our ideals by exposing the gap separating our pretenses from them – which means that the two were already disconnected and we were pretending in a dysfunctional way.

In order to get stuck in *aporia*, we must have been previously able to reach our pretense's destination – that is, we must have been able to express at some level some particular ideal. We can see this in the light of Lear's notion that to be ironized is to be "not-perfectly sure." This means that, notwithstanding the collapse of our pretense, we are still sure to some extent of having a

[143] Plato, *Meno*, 80c-d.
[144] Iakovos Vasiliou, 'Conditional Irony in the Socratic Dialogue,' in *The Classical Quarterly*, 49 (1999), p. 472.

connection to our ideals, something granted to us from our now-lost ability to reach our conceptual destination. As Kirkland puts it, in order to find ourselves in *aporia*, '*one must stand already in a certain relation of pre-understanding to that which lies beyond the obstacle*.'[145] This "pre-understanding" involves a grasp, however slight and deluded, of the conditions of a distinctively human life and of my relationship to these conditions. Subsequently, irony causes me to see that my pretense conceals a gap between my ideal of humanity and I now become aware of that gap, and this awareness comes to me in the form of an obstacle disconnecting me from achieving humanity.

According to Ulrika Carlsson, we can read *aporia* as the condition of 'static instability' – a condition in which we cannot rest, but that also prevents us from finding any natural exit from it.[146] Insofar as our ideals are a necessary element of our pretenses and therefore of our practical identity, when irony destabilizes our practical identity we lose our ethical point of reference and we are forced in a condition of ethical stasis. At the same time, as human beings we cannot exist without having a practical identity and upholding a pretense. Therefore, we cannot rest in this stasis; this creates the potential for progress in the direction of a deeper achievement of our humanity. So, as E. M. Jonas argues, *aporia* alone is not able to bring about this transformation, but this condition facilitates what he calls an 'epiphany,' that is, the rebuilding of our pretense following the new insight about our condition as human beings.[147]

According to Lear, Kierkegaard's retrieval and emulation of Socrates's attitude is a genuine development in his thought with respect to his early *The Concept of Irony*. We find textual evidence for this claim, in passages in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* where the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus criticizes "Magister Kierkegaard's" doctoral thesis. According to Climacus, Magister Kierkegaard was guilty of focusing too much on the negative side of irony, namely on irony as routine-disruptor, failing to consider how, in Lear's words, 'ironic activity can be as affirming as it is negating.'[148] According to the mature Kierkegaard and to Lear,

[145] Kirkland, 'Thinking in the Between,' p. 109.
[146] Ulrika Carlsson, 'Love as a Problem of Knowledge in Kierkegaard's either/or and Plato's Symposium,' *Inquiry*, 53 (2010), p. 50.
[147] M. E. Jonas, 'Education for Epiphany: the Case of Plato's Lysis,' *Educational Theory*, 65 (2015), p. 39.
[148] Lear, *Irony*, p. 33.

irony is not meant to produce despair or nihilism, but to clear the way for a transformation of our practical identity.

However, according to the reading of *The Concept of Irony* offered in section 1.3, we can appreciate how even there irony was presented as having a positive and productive aspect. In this respect, we can think of the appearance of Napoleon's figure as the pictorial equivalent of the post-aporetic growth in our humanity and the extent in which we appropriate our ideals; in this comparison, the regular lines of the landscape stand for the way in which we routinely understand ourselves through our pretense. In other words, these lines represent the coherence of our pretense as an image of who we are with respect to our ideals. The nothingness of the empty space disrupts this coherence: we come to be in a situation of *aporia* as we now look at the picture without being able to see how it can form an image. In this condition, no meaningful whole can be formed, and yet, some sort of incomplete picture remains, thus creating that condition of "static instability" described by Carlsson. Then, epiphany occurs as Napoleon's figure appears along with it: we are now out of *aporia* and able to see a new and enriched picture, enframed within a newfound coherence. Crucially, the appearance of the picture as a whole has now changed: a human figure is there, signifying that our subjectivity has been augmented through the aporetic experience. Yet, Napoleon's image was in some sense there from the very beginning – implied by the regular lines. The way out of *aporia* reshapes the regularity and order of the old picture, but this is somehow already present in the old picture, as a possibility unfolded by a better understanding of the humanity we already both possess and lack. **Borrowing Peter Sloterdijk's words, we could say that the ironist's intervention succeeds to the extent in which it manages to re-activate the victim's passion or vertical tension – that is, his drive to achieve an enhanced subjectivity and stop falling short of his ideals – as a result of which he is able to make "explicit" aspects of his own self which were still "implicit" or "folded" within himself.[149] This means that**, if my reading of Kierkegaard's doctoral thesis is sound, as early as in *The Concept of Irony* he was aware of the affirming role of irony – or in Lear's terms, he was already aware of the relationship between disruption and learning to be human. Therefore, we might say that the occasion for irony arises in the presence of a real, but not yet manifest gap between pretenses and ideals. The ironist

[149] On the meaning of the expressions "vertical tension," "explicit," and "implicit" see Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, transl. by Wieland Hoban (Malden: Polity, 2013) and in particular the introductory section "On the Anthropotechnic Turn," pp. 1-19.

spots this gap and subsequently exposes it, thereby making his interlocutor aware of the cracks in his pretense, setting his eyes on the "picture's empty space," and finally causing him to have an aporetic experience.

After having described the sheer experience of irony, Lear articulates his point of view arguing that irony manifests itself in three different ways. He distinguishes '*the experience of irony* from the development of a *capacity for irony*,' and both 'from what Kierkegaard calls *ironic existence.*'[150] Specifically, 'developing the capacity for irony is developing the capacity to occasion an experience of irony (in oneself or in another),' while 'ironic existence is whatever it is that is involved in turning this capacity for irony into a human excellence.'[151] We could say that these three elements taken together give us the image of the ironist: someone who is able to cause the experience of irony, who undergoes and has undergone it regularly on his quest for achieving humanity and wisdom, and who seeks to cause it in others.

As I have already mentioned, I believe that there are deep connections between Lear's reading of irony and Hadot's notions of philosophy as a way of life and his theorization of the concept of spiritual exercise. I think that this connections hold both on a conceptual and on a historical level. On a conceptual level, irony as described by Lear presents the features of a spiritual exercise. Employing Hadot's description of ancient spiritual exercises, we could read our perception of the gap between our pretense and our ideals as the fruit of Delphic self-knowledge, where our ideal of human excellence would represent our understanding of what it means to be a sage. By making this gap evident, irony causes us to establish a sincere relationship of self-knowledge with ourselves, as we realize our lack of wisdom. Our first experience of being ironically exposed causes our philosophical conversion, and further reiterations of irony – be them instances of true or restricted irony – as well as instantiations of critical reflection, mark the unfolding of our philosophical life. Conceptually, the figure of the ironist is somehow co-extensive with that of the philosopher. By this I am not claiming that Socrates's particular way of doing philosophy should be identified with philosophy *tout court*: rather, I am arguing that in Socrates we have a perspicuous view of the effect of the little disrupter, whose activity is essential to our achievement of humanity and wisdom. In other words, call it irony or anything else, my claim is

[150] Lear, *Irony*, p. 9.
[151] Ibid., p. 9.

that all philosopher must become so by enduring an aporetic experience that sets them outside of a life of foolishness and onto the path of wisdom.

On an historical level, we can read Lear's work in continuity with a particular tradition of practicing philosophy as a way of life – and therefore with a particular tradition of describing and practicing the art of disrupting pretenses – a tradition which starts with Socrates and his ironic questioning. I think this acknowledged by Lear himself, to the extent in which he claims to be reading Kierkegaard in the light of a long tradition of thought which understands humanity as an achievement, a tradition that stretches from 'Plato to the present.'[152] Crucially, Lear argues that this tradition's claims have perhaps become 'too familiar,'[153] and that the excessive familiarity of this position can disarm its claims of their ironic potential. Lear sets himself the goal to make this claim unfamiliar again,[154] presenting himself as someone who has developed his own understanding of philosophy as a spiritual practice.

2.2 The Nature of Therapeutic Action

Having unpacked Lear's account of irony, I shall now discuss his practical proposal concerning as to how we should instantiate irony. By doing so, we shall come to explore Lear's understanding of the philosophical life. Both a practicing psychoanalyst and a philosopher, Lear's philosophical investigations intertwine with his therapeutic practice as an analyst. Hence, the perfect starting point for a discussion of his understanding of the philosophical life, is his definition of "therapeutic action" contained in his 2003 book published under the same title. This term can identify two things: on the one hand, therapeutic action 'refers to the process, whatever it is, by which the patient gets better,' and on the other hand 'all of our actions insofar as we are facilitating a therapeutic process.' Accordingly, concludes Lear, 'as analysts, our acts - listening, being there,

[152] Lear, *Irony*, p. 3. To name a few: Abelard, Erasmus, Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Marx. Arnold I. Davidson, 'Introduction,' p. 33.
[153] Ibid., p. 4.
[154] Ibid., p. 4.

questions, associations, interpretations – ought to be therapeutic acts.'[155] By stating that all the analyst's acts "ought" to have a therapeutic quality, Lear makes therapy an open-ended task:

> 'as psychoanalysts, we are constantly in the process of shaping ourselves as psychoanalysts … we strive to shape ourselves into people who can listen well and who can intervene in ways that are genuinely helpful to our analysands. This is a process of becoming a certain kind of a person … the process is unending … how does this next thought, this next act, this next intervention contribute to the therapeutic action? … Being a psychoanalyst is in part a never-ending task of bringing oneself back to the activity of being a psychoanalyst. It is not a rote activity, so that once you've done it, there's really no problem involved in doing it again. To put it paradoxically: to be an analyst one must ever be in the process of becoming an analyst … Being an analyst is a constant process of re-creative repetition … This process of continually coming back to ourselves as psychoanalysts is itself part of the therapeutic action, in both of the above senses.'[156]

Although it is not mentioned, the concept of pretense is looming in this passage's background. Therapeutic action allows the analysand to work on himself, to heal from his sufferings and eventually to achieve humanity. Moreover, therapeutic action also provokes the therapist to continuously examine his own pretense, thereby implying that, insofar as becoming a therapist means achieving a form of human excellence, therapeutic action is a process through which we come to achieve our humanity, and which concerns all the persons involved in the process. Of course, the analyst plays a different role from that of the analysand: being the one who listens and leads the therapeutic process, the analyst acts as a facilitator to the analysand's quest for humanity. However, any temptation leading us to think that the analyst has fully achieved humanity is

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[155] Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony* (New York: Other Press, 2003), p. 31. Elsewhere, he writes: 'what is the psychoanalytic process if not the development and enhancement of our capacity for self-conscious awareness? Self-conscious awareness is extended to realms of mental activity that hitherto were seen through a glass darkly.' Lear, *Wisdom won from Illness*, p. 7.

[156] Ibid., pp. 32-3. In *Wisdom won from Illness*, Lear expands this point further: 'in psychoanalysis there is no finite or determinate end of the process. An act of shoemaking comes to an end in the production of a pair of shoes. By contrast, psychoanalysis lacks any such clear stopping point. Let us say that psychoanalysis aims to promote psychological health … Psychological health seems to function as an infinite end in this sense: it is not the sort of thing that once one achieves it, the process is over. Rather, psychic health is manifest in the entire life of the living being while that being is living well- Second, there need be no determinate distinction between the process of achieving psychic health and psychic health itself. Thus psychoanalysis need not be conceived as a process directed toward achieving a result that is distinct from itself. On occasions, at least, psychoanalysis can itself be a manifestation of psychic health that promotes psychic health.' Ibid., p. 150.

undermined by the fact that the analyst has to carry on an unending process of self-questioning, regarding whether or not he has actually achieved excellence as a facilitator, continuously entertaining with questions such as "am I really a therapist? Do my social practices as a therapist really match the ideals which inspire me?". Hence, in order for therapeutic action to be properly enacted, the therapist must also be involved in a process of striving for achieving humanity.[157]

Lear digs deeper into the nature of therapeutic practice by distinguishing between subjective and objective concepts. Subjective concepts name some kind of subject: for instance, 'Lover is a subjective concept in the sense that someone who loves is constantly in the process of shaping herself into a person who loves.'[158] Somebody who orientates his existence to embodying such a concept shall frame his actions according to the question "what is it to love?," thereby shaping his existence as a lover. Lear considers this task of self-shaping as unending, insofar as he holds that we can always get to some better understanding of what a certain concept means, thereby favoring an ever-deepening integration of such a concept in our existence. Reaching the end of this project would mean either that the subject had stopped living according to that concept, or that he has got stuck in his exploration.[159] Therefore, to stay on course to become, say, a lover – in spite of all the difficulties this might imply – is to be loyal toward oneself insofar as someone is a lover.[160]

In the light of Lear's definition, concepts like philosopher, sage, analyst, and analysand are all subjective concepts. More precisely, they are concepts which ought to be subjectively understood. However, it is possible to understand these concepts objectively. Just as Socrates addressed the multitude of Athenians who thought themselves to be human beings in virtue of their birth, someone can accept to be an analyst as a matter of course, insofar as he sits next to a couch and invites his patients to verbally articulate their unconscious.

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[157] Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, pp. 32-3.

[158] Ibid., pp. 37-8. Although Lear's discussion makes reference to Hans Loewald use of the pair "subjective/objective," it is arguable that Lear is also making an implicit gesture to Kierkegaard's discussion of subjectivity and objectivity in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Lear himself reports how Loewald was a reader of Kierkegaard's works. See Ibid., p. 19 and Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

[159] Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, pp. 37-8.

[160] According to Lear, one possible way to 'maintain fidelity or steadfastness toward oneself' is to 'maintain an analytic life in which one holds oneself to the fundamental rule and to analyzing the inevitable breakdowns.' Lear, *Wisdom won from Illness*, p. 8.

Lear suggests that a lack of a subjective use of the concept of objectivity is a typical feature of the pre-analytic condition.[161] In other words, before the beginning of the analysis the would-be analysand is a subject incapable of being objective. This amounts to the fact that the analysand understands his world as given, and is both unaware and incapable of discerning his unconscious projections, and therefore of the ways in which he distorts his world. Accordingly, he is unable to ask himself the following question: 'given that I wish to become/be a certain kind of a subject – a lover, a creative person, a friend, a parent, a son or daughter, a true professional, etc. – what is the correct view of the social world, what is the correct view of my inner world, that I can use to deepen myself as the subject I wish to become/be?'[162] In other words, life is unable to discern the best route for achieving human excellence. This reflects a fundamental inability to perceive reality as it is, that is, in an objective way. This is caused by a failure to employ in a subjective way the concept of objectivity.[163] The analysand must become better at understanding the world and his interiority "the way they are," and the increase in the analysand's ability to see his lack of objectivity equally signifies an increase in his ability to perceive other forms of deprivation he is suffering from, as well as his capacity of pursuing virtues other than objectivity. For instance, let us say that one's pre-analytical notion of courage is marred by an unnoticed distortion; an increase in objectivity will correspond in the polishing of its understanding of courage, thereby impacting the analysand's ability to subjectivize courage.

Hence, in order to achieve human excellence, we need to be able to articulate an objective understanding of our social and personal world, on the ground of which we can start to deepen our understanding of ourselves. Insofar as therapeutic action is a two-way process, this search for an ever-increasing sense of objectivity involves both the analysand and the analyst. Just as the analyst is engaged with a never-ending question concerning his own condition as an analyst, this also implies a quest for developing his own sense of objectivity or discernment. By so doing, the analyst will become able to better discern what is real from what is not. Subsequently, the more the analyst is able to develop himself as a psychoanalyst, the more he is able to reach out towards his analysands and their particular subjectivities, as he becomes able to better see the distortions they

[161] Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, p. 48.
[162] Ibid., p. 48.
[163] Ibid., pp. 48, 50.

project.[164] In other words, both the analyst and the analysand learn through therapy to see the image of Napoleon, and make it emerge from of the picture of their lives. Let us now consider how the therapeutic relationship facilitates the taking place of irony.

2.3 Transference and the Environment of Therapeutic Action

I will now turn my attention to the "space" created by therapeutic action, namely the environment in which therapy takes place. Just as dialogue seems to be a foundational element for the unfolding of Socrates' irony, Lear argues that also psychoanalysis needs a particular "space" so that irony can happen. This is the space of transference, created by 'the re-emergence of infantile prototypes of interpersonal experience, displaced onto the therapist and experienced with a strong feeling of immediacy,' which 'was quickly considered [by Freud and his associates] a powerful therapeutic instrument in that it brought the past into the corrective influence of the consulting room.'[165]

In order to see why psychoanalysis needs to create a "transference-space," we need to explore how the analysand enters therapy carrying a deficit of objectivity in the way he perceives her world. This lack of objectivity causes the analysand to live under the spell of an illusion. In Freud's understanding, an illusion is 'a belief, set of beliefs, or worldviews caused by a wish rather than by perception of how the world is.'[166] This illusion casts what Lear, following both Plato and Freud, calls a shadow – that is, an image which is a distortion of something bearing a degree of reality. If we are unable to see Napoleon's figure in the picture, this is a sign of our lack of objectivity and that we live engulfed in a shadow which prevents us from seeing reality as it is. This hinders our capacity of objectively perceiving the world and of living in it.

The goal of therapeutic action is to cause this illusion to emerge, to insist on its contradictions until the shadow vanishes, thereby allowing a process of growth and healing to take place.[167] This process requires the uncovering of the analysand's unconscious phantasies, that

[164] Ibid., pp. 58-9.
[165] Moshe Halevi, 'Transference as a Religious Phenomenon in Psychotherapy,' *Journal of Religion and Health*, 24 (1985), p. 10.
[166] Jonathan Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 6.
[167] Ibid., p. 6.

which cause the shadow to arise: these, are 'emotionally laden, motivationally charged structures of meaning that tend toward formal organization,' which 'tend toward the expression of an unconscious worldview, whereby all experience is interpreted in its terms.'[168] Accordingly, the psyche's unconscious structures are far from being a mass of conflicting impulses and motives, but rather form a framework able to provide unity to the self. As Lear put it in *A Case for Irony* what lies "outside" one's – conscious – mind is a basic organizing principle, which works around primordial human challenges and attempts to structure one's identity around the solution to such problems.[169] Accordingly, Lear claims that, in correlation with the unconscious worldview produced by the phantasies, a subject stands at the center of an unconsciously organized world. This is supported by a core phantasy giving an unconscious answer to the question "who am I ?," thereby shaping what we might call an unconscious practical identity or pretense.[170] What emerges through analysis is both the layer of distorted interpretation through which we perceive our world, and the unconscious work through which we produce our identity.

In the 1998 collection of essays titled *Open Minded*, Lear claims that the distortion caused by the analysand's lack of objectivity engulfs his whole perspective. He argues that the distinctive mark of psychoanalysis – with comparison to other "talking cures" – is its aim to change the analysand's own world. Therefore, therapeutic action serves the goal of letting the analysand's own private world emerge and allowing him to recognize his own activity in creating the world he lives in. **In other words, what happens is what Sloterdijk calls a 'withdrawal exercise' or an 'exercise in not-taking-up-a-position, an exercise in de-existentialization, an attempt at the art of suspending participation in life in the midst of life'[171]. As much as such an exercise can never hope to be totally accomplished – one cannot write himself off from his own world – nonetheless,** this act of making-conscious the analysand's unconscious activity eventually should make his own private world wane.[172] This does not mean that the analysand stops playing a part in structuring his own experience, but that he should progressively start doing so in a conscious way, and along the lines of what the world objectively is. In other words, we could say that the analysand must subjectivize the concept of objectivity transforming it from being just an abstract

[168] Lear, *Open Minded*, p. 10.
[169] Lear, *A Case for Irony*, p. 47.
[170] Ibid., p. 50.
[171] Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy*, p. 21.
[172] Lear, *Open Minded*, pp. 78-9.

description into an actual and active world-making principle. Freud himself conceived psychoanalysis as including a process of working-through, or, as Sebastian Gardner put it, 'a pattern of repeated and sustained realisations, and other changes in the quality of experience such as the undoing of "derealisations" (the motivated misrepresentation of external things as unreal).'[173]

Hence, therapeutic action transforms the analysand's world, frees him from the captivity of an unconsciously structured world, and eventually helps him to establish more realistic relations with the common social world.[174] When we suffer from an ironic breakdown we turn to reality and see the emergence of our augmented subjectivity in the landscape of our reality, thereby finding our subjective presence in the world and making our unconscious work explicit.

One way of conceiving the role of the analyst is to think of him as a facilitator. The analyst facilitates the analysand's access to reality, or, as Hans Loëwald put it, reality is 'mediated to the patient by the analyst.'[175] Loëwald, one of Lear's main influences, grounds his claim in a deep and wide-raging analysis of the Freudian concepts of drive, eros, and libido. In the present context, it suffices to say that the analyst mediates to the patient 'the world as it is undistorted by powerful phantasies.'[176] This mediation can take place insofar as the analyst conveys his own interpretations of the world to the analysand. These interpretations, won at the hard price of the continuous self-questioning operated by the analyst on himself convey an understanding of the self and its world which is more organized that the analysand's own.

I argued that Socrates' ignorance acted as an "empty space" which caused the others to fall into an *aporia*. The psychoanalyst follows a similar pattern: just as Socrates built a bridge by talking and questioning his interlocutors, in the same way the analyst establishes an analytic conversation with the analysand. Subsequently, the analyst tries to create a situation where the analysand can come to see his ignorance about reality. The analyst tries to create an empty space that can cause a discontinuity in the analysand's world-forming routine: falling into this empty space, the analysand lands onto the real world. This is therapeutic action. However, it is important

[173] Sebastian Gardner, *Irrationality and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 159-60.
[174] Lear, *Open Minded*, pp. 78-9.
[175] Ibid., p. 141.
[176] Ibid., p. 141.

to clarify that what the analyst tries to communicate is not his own superiorly organized world *as such*. Rather, he strives to communicate to the analysand the skills necessary to build a more objective world for himself, and he does so by showing – through his own interpretations and world-shaping activity – the evidence that there is such a thing as a world beyond the analysand's shadowy distortions. In other words, we could say that the analyst tries to teach to the analysand how to subjectivize the concept of objectivity and thereby how to develop his own ability to subjectively access the objective world.

Following Loewald, Lear holds that such a transmission of psychological organization happens across an erotic field constituted over the course of the therapy.[177] This field is designated by the concept of transference. As Aaron H. Esman observes, the concept of transference is possibly Freud's most heuristically productive discovery: nothing in his work seems to be more clinically valuable than his demonstration that analysands regularly repeat with the analyst (and with other important figures) patterns of relationship, fantasy, and conflict originating in childhood experiences.[178] According to M. Guy Thompson, Freud believed that this happens insofar as 'all human creatures, in their own fashion, acquire a manner of falling in love with other human creatures, based on the interplay between innate predilections and the circumstances they inhabit … It is our nature as human beings, to need love, in principle.' Transference is an expression of our ontological propensity to fall in love, so that this is not 'a psychological term, but an *ontological* one. It epitomizes human nature: an irresistible, insatiable clinging, in everything we do, in every relationship we obtain, each day of our lives, for the love of another human being.'[179] Through what Freud calls 'a specific method of his own in his conduct of his erotic life – that is, in the preconditions to falling in love which he lays down, in the instincts he satisfies and the aims he sets himself in the course of it' the analysand produces 'a stereotype plate (or several such), which is constantly repeated – constantly reprinted afresh – in the course of the person's life.'[180] However, Freud adds that

[177] Lear, *Open Minded*, p. 142.
[178] Aaron H. Esman, 'Introduction,' in *Essential Papers on Transference*, ed. By Aaron H. Esman (New York: New York University Press, 1990), p. 1.
[179] M. Guy Thompson, *The Truth About Freud's Technique: The Encounter with the Real* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 177, 186.
[180] Sigmund Freud, 'The Dynamics of Transference,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XII, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), pp. 99-100.

> 'only a portion of these impulses which determine the course of erotic life have passed through the full process of psychical development. That portion is directed towards reality, is at the disposal of the conscious personality, and forms a part of it. Another portion of the libidinal impulses has been held up in the course of development; it has been kept away from the conscious personality and from reality … if someone's need for love is not entirely satisfied by reality, he is bound to approach every new person whom he meets with libidinal anticipatory ideal … thus it is a perfectly normal and intelligible thing that the libidinal cathexis of someone who is partly unsatisfied, a cathexis which is held ready in anticipation, should be directed as well as to the figure of the doctor.'[181]

This way, the analysand opens up to the analyst a window in his way of looking and relating to the world, thereby making therapeutic action possible.[182]

Crucial to the understanding of the concept of transference is the insight that neuroses do express some form of structure – what Lear calls an 'idiosyncratic "ethics."'[183] In fact, Lear remarks how neuroses are among the most synthetic functions of the mind: as he put it, 'a high-functioning neurotic will "heal over" all sorts of breaks in neurotic structure by further elaborating the neurosis.'[184] This structure – which, as noted by Sebastian Gardner, is psychological rather than propositional, while still being able to influence our propositional attitudes[185] – is characterized by a compulsion to repetition. Compulsion signifies a situation where reflective thought ceases to be causally efficient and stops being represented as such, thereby being seen as epiphenomenal and unable to make any difference to what one will actually do.[186] This situation makes neuroses liable to be exposed and worked through. In this context, repetition is about a "primordial struggle" – some sort of break in our psychic development which we have not recovered from – which endures unconsciously within our psyche. Metaphorically, Lear compares this to a monster living in a cave within our psyche and sending always the same message to the

[181] Freud, 'The Dynamics of Transference,' p. 100.
[182] In this regard, Freud distinguishes also between a 'positive' and a 'negative' form of transference. The former concerns affectionate feelings, while the latter concerns hostile ones, which invariably have erotic sources. Ibid., p. 105.
[183] Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 136.
[184] Ibid., pp. 119-20.
[185] Gardner, *Irrationality*, p. 36.
[186] Ibid., p. 164. Lear, *Happiness*, p. 119.

conscious mind: 'ME WANT COOKIE!'[187] The conscious mind will be pressured into feeding the monster, unconsciously re-enacting the primordial struggle. In this regard, Freud observed that the patient does not remember anything he has forgotten or repressed – the monster and his commands – but rather repeats the memory as an action, directing it towards the doctor. The transference is itself an element of this repetition, as the forgotten past is transferred onto the doctor and the therapeutic situation.[188] In this way, the neurosis will manifest through its own symptoms, which Gardner defines as 'structures of motivated self-misrepresentation that pervert the ways in which the world appears to the person, and in which they appear to themselves.'[189] For instance, we might think about Freud's patient the "Ratman," who projected onto Freud his struggles with his father. Freud makes the obsessional structures readable to the Ratman by showing how the symptoms derive from a set of underlying conflicts.[190]

As mentioned above, our social pretenses are in part organized around unconscious attempts to solve primordial human challenges. In this sense, looking for the monster is about discovering the elemental structures of mental activity that dominate our lives.[191] These human challenges can become obstacles to our psychic growth, causing us to break in ways we cannot fully recover from. The organizing principle lurking behind our social pretenses will then include some sort of repressed emotion or fantasy which distorts our understanding of the world, and which

[187] Jonathan Lear, *Freud* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 46. As Moran Svorai points out, in the unconscious 'there are no logical rules, no modalities, no negation, and the law of non-contradiction does not apply; no causal or temporal relation obtain, and even the words used do not function as they do in the conscious mind.' Moran Svorai, 'An Aesthetic Study of Transference as a Form of Understanding,' in *Iyyun the Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly*, 53 (2004), 69-70. From this point of view, it does not matter when the break causing the neurosis has happened. Elaborating on Lear's playful example, the monster can be the result of a trauma originating in one's infancy, but the message emanating from it will always be the same, no matter how much time elapses from the episode. At the same time, this does neither imply that the manifestation of the neurosis stays the same across the analysand's life. Moreover, as Freud point out in 'A Case of Hysteria,' the dame neurotic symptom can be lent meaning by different unconscious thoughts struggling for expression. See Sigmund Freud, 'A Case of Hysteria,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. By James Strachey, vol. VII (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), pp. 40-1, 73. We could say that becoming aware of the monster's presence is a manifestation of the expansion of self-conscious awareness, which is the result of the psychoanalytic process. Lear, *Wisdom won from Illness*, p. 7.

[188] Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XII, pp. 150-1.
[189] Gardner, *Irrationality*, p. 94.
[190] Ibid., p. 91.
[191] Jonathan Lear, *Freud*, p. 49.

influences our social pretenses – this, is what Freud meant by the term 'obsessional structure.'[192] Therapy allows us to verbalize this emotion or fantasy. However, since this has been repressed, its initial recognition can easily cause a moment of uncanny and therefore ironic disruption. Insofar as it has been repressed, the unfamiliar appears dressed in some form of familiarity, as we acknowledge it as a long-operating force at the core of our being.[193]

The ironic disruption which comes with this process takes place across four dimensions. First, one's conscious practical identity is disrupted as one's "standard" images of its practical identity suddenly stop being "available."[194] Second, one faces disruption as subjective questions concerning one's own identity unfold, thereby making certain social pretenses come under scrutiny with respect to the extent to which they achieve their ideals of human excellence. For the moment I shall leave aside the third form of ironic disruption, and analyze it in depth in the next paragraph. I choose to do so since this form of ironic disruption is the most relevant for our inquiry. Following Lear's order of presentation, the fourth dimension of ironic disruption is that which operates on the level of the virtues. As we ask ourselves how can we face in a virtuous way – for instance, courageously or with integrity – what we have just discovered about ourselves and our relationship to reality, there arises an ironic questioning of what we mean by courage and integrity.[195]

The third dimension of disruption in analysis is that which happens through transference. As mentioned above, analysis will entangle the analyst in a disruptive drama, in which he stands at one end of an intermediate space where the uncanny can take place, as unconscious material is made conscious.[196] In this space, the analysand is allowed the possibility to gain practical mastery of the neurotic structure of repetition which is engulfing us. This happens insofar as in analysis we go beyond any simply cognitive acquaintance with this structure – such as the one we might gain from recognizing some instances of our behavior as influenced by the neurosis – and get the chance to learn to recognize this structure as it unfolds, so that hopefully we become able to intervene and

[192] Gardner, *Irrationality*, p. 90.
[193] Lear, *A Case for Irony*, p. 46.
[194] This process of ironic disruption does include a certain degree of suffering, insofar as the struggles at the heart of our neuroses are repeated in "front of our eyes." In this sense, Svorai makes an interesting connection between transference and tragedy, as in both cases suffering is related to an experience from the primeval past, and may lead to deep insight. See Morai, 'An Aesthetic Study of Transference,' pp. 76-7.
[195] Lear, *A Case for Irony*, p. 62.
[196] Ibid., p. 61.

change its course.[197] That relationship of transference is a bridge between the analyst and the analysand, but at the same time it is an empty canvass on which the analysand finds the opportunity to paint the picture of the world as he perceives it.

Discussing Dora's clinical case, Lear identifies three forms of transference. First, a significant figure in the analysand's world is transferred onto the analyst – in this case, Dora's transference of Herr K onto Freud. Then transference happens insofar as Dora needs someone to occupy Herr-K's position within the context of an idiosyncratic world overlapping with the real one.[198] Finally, there is transference 'as the active disruption of the capacity to carry out transference in either of the first two senses.'[199] Therefore, transference is the repetition of one's entire orientation to the world, with analysis becoming a microcosm where the enduring conflicts of this orientation are re-enacted. This is what Freud calls reproduction or repetition in the psychic field: the neurosis is reactivated in the transference as a "transference neurosis," giving to it a renewed sense of immediacy and urgency.[200] Treating the pathological orientation, the analyst lets the emotions that come with it unfold in a playful space, as 'a unique blend of reality and unreality is accorded to the experience,' thereby allowing 'the analysand to experience his emotion in a vibrant way *and* to begin to play with it.'[201] In Freud's own words, 'the transference thus creates an intermediate region between illness and real life through which the transition from the one to the other is made. The new condition has taken over all the features of the illness; but it represents an artificial illness which is at every point accessible to our intervention.'[202]

"Transference neurosis" is in Hans Loewald's words 'an operational concept … denoting the retransformation of a psychic illness … into an interactional process with a new person, the

[197] Lear, *Freud*, p. 50. Elsewhere, Lear describes this dynamic in these words: 'if the analysand is creating a disappointing world, she will bring that activity into the transference. And this puts her in a position to bring about her own psychic change – *actively*, *directly*, *immediately via the efficacy of her own self-conscious understanding*. This is a different mode of self-consciousness than the theoretical understanding that, say, I have a tendency to experience events in disappointing ways. It is, rather an immediate apprehension of self-consciousness informing her life. And it makes possible a change of psychic structure *via* a self-conscious grasp of what that structure has been and what it might become. I think of it as a practical efficacy of the self-conscious mind.' Lear, *Wisdom*, pp. 25-6.
[198] Ibid., p. 129.
[199] Ibid., p. 129
[200] Hans W. Loewald, 'The Transference Neurosis: Comments on the Concept and the Phenomenon,' in *Essential Papers on Transference*, p. 426.
[201] Lear, *Freud*, p. 137.
[202] Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,' p. 155.

analyst.'[203] Thanks to this new situation, the pathology becomes 'transparent and accessible to change by virtue of the analyst's objectivity and of the emergence of novel interaction-possibilities.'[204] This, claims Loewald, defines the analytic process as an active process of pathogenic experiences, with the goal of mastering and resolving them in new ways.[205] In this sense, the transference neurosis is 'a creation of the analytic work done by analyst and patient, in which the old illness loses its autonomous and automatic character and becomes reactivated and comprehensible as a live responsive process and, as such, changing and changeable.'[206] The analyst, handling the analysand's attachment to him, promotes the latter's awareness of his attachment. This happens as the analyst lets this relationship arise, but refuses to take part in it in such a way that it would reenact the pathology.[207] For instance, being transferred into the role of an abusive father, the analyst shall disengage himself, leaving a gap in the analysand's world which hopefully should lead him to reflect on his transferring activity. Thus, as Dora experiences Freud as "another Herr K," he is nonetheless initially unable to express himself that way. The analysis encourages him to consciously appropriate this experience and to verbally express it.[208] Furthermore, the analysand comes to understand how her previous neurotic existence was composed of disharmonious fragments, so that her sense of psychic unity was to a significant degree a self-deception.[209] Similarly, according to Gardner the Ratman is caught in the contradiction of seeing that his symptoms manifest his own mental states without being able to read them.[210] Thus, psychoanalysis allows us to recognize the "fractal" nature of our self as it is pervaded by unconscious conflicts. At the same time, psychoanalysis allows us to open lines of communication between the different warring parts of the psyche, bridging the dissenting voices and bringing them together in a common conversation.[211]

This allows for the third kind of ironic disruption to happen, insofar as the analysand realizes that there is something untrue in his projection – for example, that Freud after all is not

[203] Loewald, 'The Transference Neurosis,' p. 429.
[204] Ibid., p. 429.
[205] Ibid., p. 429.
[206] Ibid., p. 430.
[207] Ibid., pp. 430-1.
[208] Lear, *Freud*, p. 139.
[209] Ibid., p. 222.
[210] Gardner, *Irrationality*, p. 90.
[211] Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, p. 129.

Herr K. The analyst offers the emptiness – the escape point, as it were – which gives the analysand the opportunity to observe his own world from the outside. By pouring his own representation into an empty spot, the analysand comes to leave his own world by stepping into the void, realizing that the analyst is not whoever he was projecting onto him. From the place of this realization, the analysand sees the distortion from the outside. This empty place, is inhabited by the analyst and his more-organized psychical world. Sharing this empty place with the analyst, the analysand not only gains a perspective on his own world, but also comes to share some of the analyst's capacity for psychic organization. Hence, in this empty space the analysand can learn to become better at organizing his world – that is, he increases his subjectivization of the objectivity necessary not to distort his environment. He ascends to a higher and fuller subjectivity, achieving more of his humanity – in Kierkegaard's terms, he comes to see the image of Napoleon by actually inhabiting it. However, Freud is in some sense Herr K because of transference, hence, the uncanniness: the familiar experience of meeting Herr K in others is made unfamiliar because the interpretative load of the neurosis finally becomes visible. This allows the third variety of ironic disruption to take place, insofar as the warped interpretation breaks down and we start to project in the analytic context a different and healing orientation toward the world.[212] The experience of this breakdown can be fully appreciated and made use of only in transference. Normally we are busy coping with our difficulties, and we cannot afford to have a breakdown; the psychoanalytic situation offers a space and time away from normal life, where one can make this experience in isolation from the demands of one's everyday activities.

2.4 Irony, Therapeutic Action, Becoming Human

Having discussed how transference creates an environment suitable for the taking-place of ironic disruption, I shall now expand upon irony's therapeutic purpose, showing how this leads us to understand Lear's ideal of a fully achieved humanity. According to Lear 'the development of the capacity for irony facilitates psychic organization. Of its essence it serves to organize the psyche by bringing psychic aspirations and psychic pretenses into communication with each other.'[213] Here, we can see that Lear, well before *A Case for Irony*, brings together the concept of

[212] Lear, *Freud*, p. 140.
[213] Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, p. 129.

irony with that of pretense. However, he qualifies this concept with the adjective "psychic." If a pretense is a way in which we put ourselves forward, we can think of a psychic pretense as a particular aspect within that pretense, that describes what is going on at the psychological level as we carry out our action of putting ourselves forward. Insofar as psychic pretenses constitute claims we make about ourselves, they must necessarily include references to the world within which we understand ourselves to live; these include any content we might have taken in from our experience in order to describe ourselves and our inner constitution. Therefore, our psychic pretenses have to do with our objectivity, or, with how we can subjectivize the concept of objectivity. The more objectively we understand our world, the more objective our psychic pretenses will be. Insofar as irony aims to show the discrepancy between one's pretenses and one's ideals, in this psychoanalytic context this means that irony exposes how psychic pretenses may lack objectivity.

Crucially, Lear goes on to claim that 'what is essentially internalized in the psychoanalytic process is the appropriate capacity for irony.'[214] This capacity is not the province of any particular part of our psyche, but is rather the 'capacity to integrate all those agencies via a perpetual process of giving words to aspirations and exposing pretenses for what they are.'[215] Hence we can see that there is a parallel between the search for objectivity and the internalization of a capacity for irony over the course of the therapeutic action. On one hand, whatever our aspirations and ideals are, we need and want to become more objective, so that we can become better at understanding ourselves, our world, and the way we relate to it. Thus, objectivity becomes a prerequisite to the development of our pretenses and for the broader achievement of our humanity. On the other hand, irony shows the true nature of our pretenses. At least in part, the practice of irony is about testing the objectivity of our pretenses, insofar as a defective pretense may be the result of a lack of objectivity. Error points us in the direction of truth: by showing the lack of objectivity expressed by a certain pretense, irony allows us to grow in objectivity by turning us away from this pretense.

Insofar as this process of internalization and growth in our capacity for integrating our psyche is also a process of subjectivation, Lear calls this 'the process by which a subject becomes *the* subject.'[216] In other words, developing our objectivity and capacity for irony helps us to become human. Objectivity means grasping reality as it is: to be objective about ourselves means

[214] Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, p. 129.
[215] Ibid., p. 145.
[216] Ibid., p. 130.

to come to see ourselves as we already are – or rather to come to be ourselves. With respect to irony, Lear writes that 'the possibility of disruption is built into the very idea of mindedness,' something which becomes clear when 'we think of the mind as a differentiated unity *capable of growth*. For how could a differentiated unity grow other than by disrupting itself and then, as it were, healing over that disruption?'[217] By internalizing the concept and capacity of irony, we nurture and promote a mechanism which is typical of the way in which the human mind works. We could say that the capacity for irony is neither implanted nor acquired, but that in a sense it is "already there." Once again, this means achieving the humanity that in another sense we already own. Underlining this view, Lear writes in *A Case for Irony* 'the unity that is genuinely available to us is ... marked by disruption and division ... whatever unity is genuinely available *partially consists* in certain forms of disruption. The aim of unity should not be to overcome these disruptions, but to find ways to live well with them. Ironically, the unity that is available to us is a peculiar form of disunity.'[218]

2.5 Irony and Love

In order to complete our investigation of Lear's work, we need to make reference to his account of love, which is integral to his understanding of the human condition and of what it means to achieve humanity. Lear pictures love in a Freudian guise, describing as the driving force behind the individuation process. In this sense, we grow as subjects when and if our eroticity grows. Hence, the work of love intertwines with that of irony and with the quest for a fuller objectivity, insofar as love gets often stuck in its growth. When this happens, further individuation is prevented, and irony must intervene to free love from its hindrances.

In his 1990 book *Love and its Place in Nature*, Lear writes that 'As [Freud's] thought unfolded, he came to recognize a basic developmental force in nature. This force, which he called love, permeates the animate world and tends toward the development of ever higher and more complex unities … Within the human realm love becomes a far-reaching psychological force.'[219]

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[217] Lear, *Open Minded*, p. 90.
[218] Lear, *A Case for Irony*, p. 43.
[219] Jonathan Lear, *Love and its Place in Nature: a Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1990), p. 12.

In this book, Lear embraces an Aristotelian view of emotions, according to which 'an emotion should be conceived as providing a *framework* through which the world is viewed.'[220] Subsequently, 'love is not just a feeling or a discharge of energy, but an emotional orientation to the world … Love is … a force within us for development into an ever more complex and higher unity.'[221] Accordingly, Lear argues that, 'insofar as he traced the route of love as it is manifested in human beings, Freud saw that it was a force for individuation.'[222] Furthermore, he goes on to claim that love is primarily responsible for the existence of our world: 'it is a condition of there being a world that it be lovable by beings like us. This is more than a psychological condition of there being a world *for us*. There is no content to the idea of a world that is not a possible world for us. And a world that is not lovable ... is not a possible world.'[223] Love is not just the force responsible for the individuation process – that is, what Lear calls achieving humanity or becoming *the* subject – but it is also a quality that we find in our environment and which encourages us to become individuals. That is, the lovability of the world, when actualized, encourages us to love and to grow in love, thus growing as subjects. From this we can derive that, if any possible world is a lovable world, then any possible world will contain some potentially lovable aspects – that is, something that at least potentially we can come to value.

Insofar as our values are rooted into the world's lovable aspects, we could say that – since they are the manifestations of love's framing of our world – they are manifestations of love itself. Hence, in loving what we value we are indirectly loving love itself. Moreover, every time we strive to embody what we value – such as for example when a philosopher is working on himself out of his love for wisdom with the goal of becoming wiser – this is nothing but the manifestation of love's pushing so that we can come to manifest it in a stronger way. Hence, we love our values insofar as we value love, and we strive to embody them insofar as we strive to embody love. However, insofar as love is the prime constituent of our psyche, as well as what gives consistency to our world, by loving love and trying to embody it, we are also loving ourselves and trying to become ourselves. In other words, to practice irony, and to seek to grow in objectivity and psychic integration, are moves prompted by love.

[220] Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature*, p. 47.
[221] Ibid., p. 153.
[222] Ibid., p. 28.
[223] Ibid., p. 142.

Lear considers Socrates a prime example of somebody who strove to achieve humanity. If a strengthening of our relationship with love is what leads us to achieve individuation and humanity, it follows that Socrates was a prime example of someone who strove to achieve an erotic life – and such is undoubtedly also Plato's contention in the *Symposium* and in the *Phaedrus*. Of course, this implies that there is a connection between living the life of the ironist and that of the eroticist. Here, we hit upon the connection between irony and love: if irony and the practice of irony belong to the philosophical life, and love and subjectivization exist side by side with irony, it follows that the philosophical life shall include both irony and love. Of course, this is already implied by the etymology of the word philosophy itself, as we have already discussed in the introduction.

How do love and irony cooperate in the unfolding of the philosophical life? To address this question we need to explore another aspect of Lear's characterization of love, namely his discussion of Freud's concept of drive. According to Lear, a drive 'is a frontier creature.'[224] By this expression, he indicates the "fleeting" nature of drives, a concept Freud himself struggled to define.[225] Freud, on the one hand introduced 'the drive as the *psychical representative* of a physiological force [while] on the other hand, he [said] that "in itself the drive is without quality" and this suggests that he is identifying the drive with the physiological force itself. It looks as if Freud is constantly placing the drives on different sides of the frontier between the psychical and the physical.'[226] However, Lear observes that 'this doesn't do justice to the possibility that a drive may straddle the border. It may even call into question the idea of a sharp boundary.'[227] Hence, love – insofar as it is a drive – can be addressed both from a psychological and from a physiological point of view. Each time, its features will be assessed according to the vocabulary and the set of concepts which suits best each perspective.[228] Hence, a 'drive *considered psychologically* is a mental stimulus, an item in the mind, a psychical representative of biological stimuli. The drive *considered physiologically* is a purely physiological process.'[229]

[224] Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature*, p. 123.
[225] Ibid., p. 121.
[226] Ibid., p. 122.
[227] Ibid., p. 122.
[228] Ibid., p. 122.
[229] Ibid., p. 122.

In *Love and its Place in Nature*, Lear claims that Socrates was a practitioner of an early form of psychoanalysis.[230] He also suggests that the development of psychoanalysis itself was part of love's developmental history.[231] Hence, love not only powers the impulse to strive for higher levels of self-development, but also inspires the creation of techniques useful to the accomplishment this task. If we follow Hadot's and Lear's interpretations of Socrates as a practitioner both of philosophy as a way of life and of some early form of psychoanalysis, the latter emerges as an instance of the former. It follows that philosophy and irony are both results of love's developmental history and, therefore, aspects of the broader history of the human quest for integration and growth in love.

On Lear's view, to become distinctively human is to allow love to operate in our existence, shaping us into ever more integrated persons. Insofar as becoming integrated includes embodying values that are themselves love's manifestations, irony's work is to allow us to see when we are failing to live a fully erotic life. Lear's intuition that the form of psychic integration that we can hope to achieve must include the possibility of disruption, amounts to say that there is always room for more love in our life: the erotic drive never really comes to rest. When the distorting shadow has caught our world and clouded our view, we get stuck in false pretenses going nowhere, rather than growing in love and life as we should. Our love may be misdirected by false values which only have an appearance of being the manifestations of love, or maybe we do not properly love our ideals – that is to say, we fail to embody them. In these conditions, love cannot manifest itself to us in the way it should, nor it can work to build us up to maturity, and to fully appropriate our ideals. To practice irony is to realize that there is a gap between our mode of existence and the fullness of life and subjectivity: the ensuing condition of *aporia* occasions a re-opening of love's flowing and of its molding activity on us. The goal of this process of growth, which from Lear's point of view must be tied to the goal of psychoanalysis, is freedom – 'the final cause of psychoanalysis' and 'the kind of health that psychoanalysis aims to facilitate.'[232] Freedom is the capacity to see reality as it is, undistorted by any shadow, to get rid of our neurotic projections, thereby being able to live up to our own ideals. In other words, the achievement of freedom stands

[230] Lear, *Wisdom won from Illness*, p. 24.
[231] Ibid., p. 28.
[232] Ibid., p. 151.

for the achievement of wisdom in Lear's understanding of the philosophical life, where wisdom is described as the capacity of seeing things as they really are.

PART 2:
HEALTH, GENEALOGY, AND DECONSTRUCTION:
NIETZSCHE'S ENACTMENT OF THE SOCRATIC TRADITION

Chapter 1) On True and False Culture: Nietzsche's practice of Socratic irony in *David Strauss: the Confessor and the Writer*

1.1 Untimely and Ironic Meditations

In this chapter I shall discuss how Nietzsche included the practice of irony in his philosophical practice, and the ways in which irony connects with other aspects of his thought. The broader goal of this investigation is to sketch the features of the philosophical life as understood from a Nietzschean point of view.

I shall begin by discussing one of Nietzsche's early texts – the first of his four *Untimely Meditations*, entitled "David Strauss: the Writer and the Confessor" – arguing that this work can be read as an exercise of irony. This text attacks a particular concept of culture and the ideal of the cultivated man that comes with it, insofar as this gives birth to pretenses which fail to be properly philosophical, and which do not foster the achievement of full humanity. I shall first present the context in which this text was written; then, I will discuss Nietzsche's critique of the ideal of the "man of culture," and finally expose Nietzsche's own positive proposal. Finally, I shall elucidate the features that make *DS* an ironic text.

The reason which prompted Nietzsche to write the first of the *Untimely Meditations* – a criticism of David Strauss' book *The Old Faith and the New* – was a personal quarrel between his friend and mentor Richard Wagner and David Strauss himself.[233] Apparently, in 1865 Strauss accused Wagner of having persuaded Ludwig II – then King of Bavaria – to fire a rival musician. In retaliation, as late as in 1872 Wagner suggested that Nietzsche read Strauss' latest book, in

[233] Bernd Magnus & Kathleen M. Higgins, 'Nietzsche's works and their themes,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. By Bernd Magnus & Kathleen M. Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 24-5.

which Strauss rejected the Christian faith in favor of a Darwinian, materialistic and patriotic worldview. Nietzsche agreed with Wagner that this book was superficial and resolved himself to write a rebuttal of its thesis.[234]

Far from being just a critical book review, the text has a strong polemical character, and is framed as a personal attack on the figure of Strauss. Nietzsche's language is aggressive and inflammatory. These traits can easily prevent us from understanding the deeper issue which Nietzsche is concerned with. As I will discuss in detail in the next sections, Nietzsche was critical of the model of culture advocated at that time in Germany, and he considered the 'men of culture' of his age to be nothing but 'cultural Philistines' – namely, people who deceitfully believe to be cultivated (UM 1, 2).[235] David Strauss came to be identified by Nietzsche as the cultural Philistine *par excellence*, a 'classic Philistine' (*UM*, I, 7). [236] Accordingly, Nietzsche wanted to attack Strauss in order to undermine a particular ideal of what it means to be a cultured individual, picking those among Strauss' traits which he deemed to best represent the malaise of German society.[237] In a nutshell, the ironic character of *DS* lies in this: that Nietzsche targeted Strauss as a way of showing the cultivated Germans that they still needed to achieve a culture; in other words, Nietzsche aims to cause an *aporia* in his contemporary readers, regarding whether or not they really are cultivated.

[234] Magnus & Higgins, *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, p. 215. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning how one of the main reasons for Nietzsche's abandonment of the Christian faith was offered by the historical criticism of the Bible. This approach to Scripture was championed by Strauss himself in his *The Life of Jesus* – a text which Nietzsche knew and considered favourably. Hence – at least at this stage of Nietzsche's production – we have to understand his opposition to Strauss as tempered by a common understanding and criticism of Christianity. On this, see Joerg Salaquard, 'Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian tradition,' in ibid., p. 92.

[235] I make reference to R. J. Hollingdale's translation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[236] Magnus and Higgins, 'Nietzsche's works and their themes,' p. 25. David Strauss himself seems to self-identify with the role and example of a particular breed of Germans. As we read in an extract of his *The Old and New Faith* quoted in Nietzsche 'We shall give only an indication … of what we do … Besides our profession – for we belong to the most varied professions … we try to keep our minds as open as possible to all the higher interests of mankind [*sic*]: during recent years we have participated in the liveliest way in the great national war and the construction of the German state.' (*UM*, I, 1) Hence, Strauss aims at giving direction to a particular category of people – occupying all parts of the class spectrum – to who he belongs, and who identifies as the prime mover of the Germany of his days.

[237] Interestingly enough, the point of this work got lost on Strauss himself, who could not help but wonder how someone he did not know personally could bear such hatred against him. As Strauss died 6 months after the publication of Nietzsche's work, in a letter to his friend Gerdsdorff he expressed the hope that Strauss' last days were not saddened because of him.

Nietzsche's concerns with German culture appear already at the beginning of *DS*, where he discusses at length the views of the German people concerning the outcome of the Franco-Prussian war. In particular, he worries that in the public eye 'German culture too was victorious in that struggle' (*UM*, I, 1). The Germans believed that the victory over France was not just military but also cultural, thus understanding German culture to be in a condition of health and strength. By contrast, Nietzsche holds that German culture is at a low-point, and that the supposedly cultivated men of his days are held under the sway of false teachers. He argues that 'there exists a steadfast belief that we are in possession of a genuine culture: the enormous incongruity between this complacent, indeed exultant belief and an in fact notorious cultural deficiency seems to be apparent only to the select few. For all those whose views coincide with public opinion have covered their eyes and stopped their ears' (*UM*, I, 2). Subsequently, Nietzsche labels his meditation untimely insofar as it goes against the grain of what "the time" – that is, the public opinion of his days – believes. Let us now turn to examine the details of *DS*, beginning with Nietzsche's description of the "human type" represented by Strauss.

1.2 The Cultural Philistine

Having registered how so many Germans fail to see the awful condition in which their culture lies, Nietzsche wonders what sort of man "must have come to dominate in Germany" (*UM*, I, 2) so as to hide this condition. He calls this species of man "the *cultural Philistine*." (*UM*, I, 2) The word Philistine, writes Nietzsche 'signifies … the antithesis of a son of the muses, of the artist, of the man of genuine culture.' *UM*, I, 2) However, the cultural Philistine is an even worse instance of the more general type of the Philistine, insofar as he lives by a delusion: 'he fancies that he is himself a son of the muses and man of culture,' and thus, 'he solemnly denies he is a Philistine.' (*UM*, I, 2) This condition of ignorance concerning his own status does not affect only the cultural Philistines, insofar as these persons possess cultural power. Accordingly, they are to be considered directly responsible for the beliefs entertained by the German public opinion, being responsible for shaping the cultural life of the nation after their own persuasions and tendencies. The cultural Philistine wrongly believes that he is a man of culture, and at the same time he instills this mistaken view in the whole of the German nation.

The cultural Philistine's dominion, deprives him of the opportunity to be freed from his delusions. Insofar as he has a sort of intellectual monopoly, he never comes across any different conception of culture, and thus, he becomes unable to realize the nature of his condition. As Nietzsche himself put it, 'with this lack of all self-knowledge, he [the cultural Philistine] feels firmly convinced that his "culture" is the complete expression of true German culture: and since he everywhere discovers cultivated people of his own kind, and finds all public institutions, schools and cultural and artistic bodies organized in accordance with his kind of cultivation … he also bears with him everywhere the triumphant feeling of being the worthy representative of contemporary German culture.' (*UM*, I, 2) The cultural Philistine settles for a model of culture – one 'whose gospel has been proclaimed by Strauss' (*UM*, I, 8) – without imagining that different concepts of culture are possible. In fact, even when they come across different attitudes towards this topic, the cultural Philistines feel threatened and react by segregating their proponents. Nietzsche argues that the Philistine will always end up labeling his way of life as 'healthiness,' calling 'sick' and 'neurotic' anyone who threatens his complacency. Once more, David Strauss exemplified this behavior when he called Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophizing 'ingenious but in many ways unhealthy and unprofitable.' (*UM*, I, 2)

The cultural Philistine's sense of self-complacency causes him to be in a condition of "intellectual relaxation." In this sense, Nietzsche claims that the cultural Philistines do not create new culture – like true men of culture should do – but they are simply able to find and adopt the one already present. In order to support this claim, Nietzsche makes a contrast between the cultural Philistines and those who he considers to be the true heroes of German culture – for example Schopenhauer, Goethe, and Beethoven. Nietzsche categorizes these personalities as seekers, arguing that 'what they were seeking with such perseverance was precisely that which the cultural Philistine fancied he already possessed: a genuine, original German culture.' (*UM*, I, 2) Hence, the true German men of culture were such because they refused to rest content with their own cultivation, and never stopped "seeking" and "growing." Furthermore, writes Nietzsche, instead of honoring the seekers by going on 'seeking in their spirit and with their courage,'[238] the cultural

[238] Below, I notice that Nietzsche champions a view of culture in connection with a view of education as Bildung. One of the aspects of Bildung according to Frederik Pio is its "untraditionalism" as opposed to "traditionalism" and "anti-traditionalism." In this sense, a process of Bildung always stands in relationship to a tradition which should be neither rejected nor blindly reproduced. Instead, the aim of the Bildung process is that of appropriating and re-

Philistine affixes to them 'the suspect word "classic";' thereby, 'the cultural Philistine settles accounts with them so as not to have to follow after them and to go seeking.' (*UM*, I, 2) Thus, the cultural Philistine turns the 'seekers' into 'finders.' (*UM*, I, 2) The Philistines not only betray the seekers by failing to achieve and not wishing to pursue true cultivation, but, as seekers are turned into finders, they superimpose their own understanding of culture on the cultural figures of the past.

This contrast between finders and seekers, indicates how Nietzsche's philosophical concerns and practice resonate with Lear's. As we discussed at length in the previous chapter, the duty of the ironist is to dispel the illusion of having achieved human excellence. Nietzsche is aiming at the same goal although expressed in a different vocabulary. In this respect, we could say that the finders are those who mistakenly think that they have achieved their ideal of human excellence capabilities, whereas the seekers are those who see their deficiencies and seek to overcome them, thereby really cultivating themselves. Consequently, attacking David Strauss as the cultural Philistine *par excellence*, is a means to cause ironic uncanniness in the whole Philistine class by showing how their exemplar has yet to achieve culture and humanity.

1.3 Nietzsche's Concept of Culture

Having seen why Nietzsche despises the cultural Philistines, let us consider his concept of true culture. Nietzsche defines culture as 'unity of artistic style in all the expressions[239] of the life of a people.' (*UM*, I, 1) Hence, to seek to have a culture is to strive to develop this artistic style with respect to one's life, whereas to find a culture is to adopt an artistic style developed by somebody else. Crucially, this concept of culture is normative:[240] Nietzsche's definition of culture implies a task, by defining culture as something that must be strived for and achieved by bringing about a particular relationship between different elements. In this sense, we can compare this

enacting the tradition. Frederik Pio 'The Concept of "Bildung"/ in Dialogue: Response to Oivind Varkoy, 'The Concept of "Bildung",' *Philosophy of Music Education*, 18 (2010), pp. 98-9.

[239] This includes not just literature and the arts, but also clothes, housing, fashion and manners. Leddy, 'Nietzsche on Unity of Style,' p. 555.

[240] Ibid., pp. 554-5.

concept to Lear's Socratic point that humanity is a condition that must be achieved – or, that it must be sought after rather than be found.

Accordingly, a true culture will never be a "found" one, as this would lack the genuine striving for bringing together in an original way the different aspects of one's existence. In fact, it would mean adopting a unity of style corresponding to the expressions of a life which is not one's own. We can read Nietzsche's call to live as the seekers did as a call to be inspired by their attitude, rather than plagiarizing the way they arranged their own existences. Moreover, the continuous striving for culture of the seekers suggests that Nietzsche thought of this search for a unity of style as an always "open" quest. As time passes and our life expresses itself in new ways, it is necessary to give unity of style also to these new expressions. In other words, part of what it means to achieve unity of style is to be constantly seeking to achieve it, another reason why a finder will never genuinely be a man of culture. Moreover, as much as it emphases individuals, Nietzsche's concept of culture holds together the individual and the whole of society. His reference to the 'people' in the definition above, indicates that the individual strives to achieve a personal culture always within the context of a common framework.

According to Thomas Leddy, through his definition of culture Nietzsche is comparing nations and individuals to works of art.[241] To be more precise, we might say that these are potential works of art, and that they become such when they actually develop unity of style. Leddy suggests that, works of art are "organic wholes," composed by parts which reflect a commonality and unity of purpose, while the parts themselves show these features with respect to one another.[242] In other words, individuals become organic wholes when all the expressions of their lives show a unitary character, having a number of traits in common and combining them together in a meaningful and coherent whole. For example, I am an organic whole, insofar as all of my organs, tissues, bones,

[241] Leddy, 'Nietzsche on Unity of Style,' p. 553. In Leddy's opinion, we can see a parallel between Nietzsche and the early German Romantics in this approach to individuals and cultures as works of art. However, it must be noticed that the connection between Nietzsche's work and that of the Romantics is disputed – Leddy himself quotes Laurence Lampert's *Nietzsche's Teaching: an Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). Walter Kaufman, in his *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, and Anti-Christ* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) holds that at the time of the Strauss essay Nietzsche was already rejecting the views of both the early Romantics and Wagner's neo-Romanticism. In this sense though, Leddy specifies that while he does not deny Nietzsche's rejection of some aspects of Romanticism, he maintains that he adopted other themes from this movement. Furthermore, Nietzsche came to criticize his early work for its Romantic tendencies.
[242] Ibid., p. 555.

etc. form a coherent and meaningful whole insofar as they are not just stacked one upon another; in turn, they work and cohere together functionally. This is also apparent if we consider two parts of myself in isolation, say, my stomach and my esophagus: even if we exclude the whole for a while, these two parts unmistakably appear as the stomach which is connected to that esophagus – again, they are not just randomly piled one upon the other. Analogously, society achieves such a condition of organicity when its expressions and parts – the individuals – stand in a similarly meaningful and coherent relationship. On this view, we become cultured individuals not just with respect to ourselves, but also with respect to our environment. So, while the Philistine's illusions are nurtured within and by Philistine institutions and a Philistine society, the true man of culture will require a different context. Furthermore, if all the expressions of an individual's life are determined not just by himself but also by his context, this means that the individual has to exist in a condition of only partial autonomy.[243] Social institutions that create finders will oppose the birth of seekers.

Another implication of Nietzsche's concept of culture, is that he opposes true cultivation to "erudition," that is, to the accumulation and storage of notions. As he put it, 'much knowledge and learning is neither an essential means to culture nor a sign of it, and if needs be can get along very well with the opposite of culture, barbarism, which is lack of style.'[244] Nietzsche adds that 'it is in such a chaotic jumble of styles that the German of our day dwells:[245] and one seriously wonders how, with all his erudition he can possibly fail to notice it.' (*UM*, I, 1) Here we see how Nietzsche's concept of culture comes full circle with his criticism of cultural philistinism. The Philistines – and David Strauss above all – may certainly possess a vast erudition, but their mistake is to believe that this is the equivalent of having a culture. Where culture commands unity in all of one's life expressions, erudition can co-exist with the lack of harmony and cohesion caused by the

[243] Luzia Gontijo Rodrigues, 'Unidade de Estilo e Educacao dos Impulsos em Escritos de Juventude de Friedrich Nietzsche', *Trans/form/acao*, 27 (2004), pp. 81-2.

[244] Here we can see Nietzsche working with the difference between the concept of *Bildung* and that of *Erziehung* – both of which are translatable in English as "education." Where the former means to educate a persona s a human being, the latter is to educate a person in a particular professional field. More relevantly to this case, a hallmark of Bildung is that the subject matter, once acquired, becomes part of one's personality. Hence, Nietzsche is promoting a vision of Bildung as internalization and unification in a single style of one's knowledge, rather than a mechanic piling up of notions. Oliving Varkoy, 'The Concept of "Bildung",' *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, 18 (2010), pp. 86-9. For a brief but comprehensive history of the concept of Bildung, see Susan L. Cocalis, 'The Transformation of "Bildung" from an Image to an Ideal,' *Monatshefte*, 70 (1978), pp. 400ff.

[245] That Nietzsche sees this as a problem is consistent with his support during this time of Wagnerian opera as a transformation of the German arts under a new unity of form and style. Ibid., p. 554.

absence of culture. This is closely related to the Philistine habit of dividing one's own existence into different compartments, preventing his knowledge from actively affecting his way of being and developing a dysfunctional existence where different sides of the same personality do not communicate with one another.

As foregrounded in a passion for erudition rather than for genuine culture, Strauss' *The Old Faith and the New* can be at best entertaining, insofar as it only-half-listens to 'the serious things of life in general.' (*UM*, 1, 8) In fact, states Nietzsche, this lack of seriousness reveals Strauss' "lack of expertise in life," given which 'when we hear Strauss speak of the problems of life … we are appalled at his lack of real experience … all his judgments are so uniformly bookish.' (*UM*, 1, 8)[246]

Still, Nietzsche allows that 'even an inferior and degenerate culture cannot be thought of as failing to exhibit a stylistic unity within which the manifold phenomena which characterized it are harmonized.' (*UM*, I, 2) However, the 'uniformity which is so striking in the cultivated people of Germany today is a unity only through the conscious or unconscious exclusion and negation of every artistically productive form and the demand of a true style.' (*UM*, I, 2) Hence, by exercising 'negation' and 'exclusion,' the Philistine 'finally acquires a coherent collection of such negations, a system of un-culture, to which one might even concede a certain "unity of style" if he is allowed to choose between a stylistically agreeable action and one of the opposite kind, he invariably elects the latter, and because he always does so all his actions bear the same negative stamp.' (*UM*, I, 2)

Thus, by refusing to deal with all the forces which would lead him to develop a true culture – that is, those which would give him the capacity to seek a unity of style – the Philistine manages to achieve a coherence of sort. If this were not the case, no concrete individual would be able to instantiate the "type" of the cultural Philistine, as we can hardly imagine a form of life which ultimately lacks any form of coherence. However, this should never be mistaken as being the same sort of thing which the seeker does as he gives harmony to his own existence. Simple coherence does not necessarily imply harmony: while results from a meaningful composition of different elements according to a certain artistic style – that is, from a systematic collection of different elements in a harmonic and unitarian whole – Nietzsche seems to imply that coherence can be

[246] This was also Nietzsche's reason to refuse philology as it was practiced in the days – see Jerry L. Jennings, 'From Philology to Existential Psychology,' in *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 9 (1988), p. 58.

obtained by a systematic avoidance of harmony and unity. Thus, if as Leddy argues the Philistine lacks the characteristic of being an organic whole, this does not preclude him from somehow "sticking together." While the seeker attains unity of style by choosing to act creatively and in favor of a harmonious existence, the Philistine always acts against something, with the goal of denying creativity. Accordingly, he manages to keep his parts together by opposition to something rather than by affirmation according to a particular style. Hence the cultural Philistine is 'he who exhibits his strength only in warding off a real, artistically vigorous cultural style and through steadfastness in warding off arrives at a homogeneity of expression which almost resembles a unity of style.' (*UM*, I, 11)

In conclusion, we can observe how the terms set down by Nietzsche can be gathered under the categories we have employed in the previous sections. We can read the opposition between cultural Philistinism and true cultivation as that between philosophy as "pure speculation" and philosophy "as a way of life." In this sense, let us think of the Philistines' "compartmentalization" of existence, their unwillingness to pursue self-knowledge, and their lack of seriousness when it comes to culture as the marks of a philosopher who is not genuinely engaging with the philosophical life, who refuses to take seriously the Delphic call to self-knowledge, and who un-ironically rests in his self-assurance of being cultured. If the cultural Philistine is a fake philosopher – that is, insofar as he is somebody who proclaims to be a cultured individual but who is not engaging in the philosophical life – the true philosopher shall be the one who seeks restlessly to achieve a unity of style, and thereby a true culture. Once again, this resonates with Lear's account, which sets psychic integration – which exists only under the provision of continuous exposition to ironic disruption – as the goal of the philosophical life. Similarly, to achieve unity of style means to be ready to perpetually expose this unity to a process of disruption followed by a new and higher achievement of unity, insofar as the seeker and true philosopher shall always engage with the new experiences that life brings to him, striving to give them unity. **I hold that this comparison is further reinforced by linking the "seeker life-style" with Kierkegaard's connection between emptiness and irony. In this sense, the seeker is always willing to face what is discontinuous and disruptive with his own already established intellectual paradigm and social practices – something that in turn the Philistine always tries to avoid, being willing to deal only with what is similar to him.** Therefore, while I am not suggesting that psychic integration and unity of style are synonymous, we find that for both Lear and Nietzsche the philosophical life – and

therefore, the achievement of humanity – involves self-knowledge, a serious and total engagement with life and culture, and finally the perpetual achievement of a unity which, in order to exist, requires to be regularly disrupted.

Having set out the terms of Nietzsche's discourse in *DS*, I shall now further substantiate my argument that this is an ironic text, hence deepening the parallel between Nietzsche and Lear.

1.4 Elements of Irony: the Ironic Question

In order to underline the nature of *DS* as an exercise of irony, I shall discuss another aspect of the ironic experience discussed by Lear in *A Case for Irony*, namely how exercising irony includes posing a so-called "ironic question."

If we apply this hermeneutic to Nietzsche's text, we can easily see the ironic question underlying it: we simply have to substitute "Christian" with "man of culture." While Nietzsche is not criticizing the aim of becoming a man of culture, he is very hostile to the way German society expects people to pursue this ideal. More broadly, he is critical of the way the social practices of his time shapes what human excellence is taken to be. Hence his attack on Strauss points not to a lack of commitment, but rather to a misdirection in the German understanding of what culture is. By criticizing the exemplar of this misdirected conception of a man of culture, Nietzsche is attempting to place the ironic question in his readers's minds: "among all German men of culture, is there any German man of culture?" At the same time, by contrasting the finders of his days with the seekers of the past generations, Nietzsche is attempting to present a different instance of the ideal man of culture, which he thinks is worthy to be pursued.

1.5 Elements of irony: Ad Hominem Arguments

Before concluding my exploration of *DS*, I shall discuss a second ironic feature of this text. The way Nietzsche directs his many *ad hominem* arguments against Strauss allows us to explore another of Lear's points concerning irony: that irony is always something personal. As Lear put it, 'irony … is radically first-personal. [It] is something *that disrupts me now*.'[247] Hence the exercise of irony has always something to do with someone's self and his illusions concerning having

[247] Lear, *Irony*, p. 17.

achieved his own ideals, thereby affecting a particular individual directly and, as it were, in the first person. On this view, it might appear that David Strauss himself is the only person who could be ironically affected by *DS,* insofar as the text is directly aimed at him. If the recipients of irony are Nietzsche's readers, we might be skeptical that he can make his ironic question become personal to them, insofar as he is dealing personally and directly with Strauss.

However, I want to suggest that Nietzsche's text ironically addresses its readership indirectly. In this sense, we can read *DS* as an ironic work not primarily because of its scathing remarks concerning Strauss' himself, but rather inasmuch as through these remarks Nietzsche aims to disrupt those who relate to Strauss as the embodiment of an ideal. Hence, rather than attacking the cultural Philistine as a general and abstract figure, Nietzsche focuses on a real individual's thought which he takes to represent this category. In this way, he takes Strauss's flaws as a human being and as an author to be representative of the human flaws actually present in those he inspires. By assuming that Strauss represents an entire group of people, and by showing that he is not truly a man of culture, Nietzsche aims to ironize both Strauss and all the cultural Philistines approaching his book.[248]

Normally, *ad hominem* arguments such as those included in *DS* are considered to be logical fallacies, attacks mistakenly directed toward a person instead of against his argument.[249] However, argues Robert C. Solomon, such arguments are justified if we give relevance to the connection between the thinker and his thought, insisting that the quality of one's ideas also depends on one's personality. Nonetheless, observes Solomon, it is not necessarily the person as such who is relevant to the argument, if by that we mean the person 'as the incidental bearer of an innumerable collection of aspects, properties, and relations.'[250] Instead 'a person is related to a thesis or an argument by virtue of his or her membership in a certain class, trivially, the class of those who promulgate that thesis or argument. Much less trivially, it is the class of those who are in a certain position, share a certain concern, utilize a certain apparatus or language.'[251] From this point of view, *DS* is a text marked by Nietzsche's perspectivism – although this happens as it were

[248] Bernd Magnus, Kathleen M. Higgins, 'Introduction to Nietzsche's Works,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, p. 25.
[249] Robert C. Solomon, 'Nietzsche's *ad hominem*: Perspectivism, Personality and *Ressentiment*,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, pp. 188-9.
[250] *Solomon*, 'Nietzsche's *ad hominem*,' p. 193.
[251] Ibid., p.193.

ante litteram, as of course perspectivism is a position which he will explicitly elaborate only in his later works.[252] Nietzsche *assumes* while writing *DS* that one's thought cannot be separated and evaluated in abstraction from the rest of one's existence - something which includes one's interests, ideals, values, or, one's *perspective* on things. In this sense, 'if there is no separating the spectator from the spectacle … in evaluating the one we inevitably evaluate the other as well.'[253] To address the ideas of a man of culture is to deal with the kind of existence that supports these ideas, insofar as the former exist as the product and manifestation of the latter. This implies that the flaws of the former develop from flaws of the latter, and that to criticize a person's ideas is also to criticize the elements of his personality that made these ideas possible – and vice versa.

Moreover, Solomon argues that Nietzsche's employment of *ad hominem* arguments finds its origin in his understanding of himself as a psychologist. Nietzsche is interested in discussing philosophies and ideals in connection with their embodiments in the lifestyles and attitudes of particular individuals. For example, the fact that (according to Nietzsche) Strauss lacks courage (*UM*, 1, 7),[254] undermines his arguments, insofar as it shows that his ideas are those of a man without a strong character. However, this psychological approach to philosophy means that Nietzsche's arguments are bound to be contextualized to the particular psyche he is analyzing.[255] This, as Solomon puts it, is the result of a "personal" approach to philosophy – that is, an approach that deals with philosophers and their philosophies as inseparable from one another, and that assesses the correctness of arguments alongside the character of the person who is formulating them.[256]

Beyond Nietzsche's work and *DS* in particular, we might say that, in general, to have a personal approach to philosophy means to have a specific concern for the first person – ours and others' – as we investigate and formulate our philosophy. Crucially, "personal" is a label that we can also use to describe Lear's and Socrates' approach to philosophy. However, in other respects they differ from Nietzsche. In general, philosophers that we can gather under Hadot's category of philosophy as a way of life can be defined as having a personal approach to philosophy, insofar as

[252] Solomon, 'Nietzsche's *ad hominem*,' p. 196.
[253] Ibid., p. 196.
[254] Ibid., pp. 180-1.
[255] Ibid., pp. 180-1.
[256] Ibid., p. 185.

a practice of philosophy as a spirituality necessarily presupposes a concern for the self and is therefore self-personal. This includes the fact that we can read *DS* as a spiritual exercise, an ironic "adventure," an awakening to life for the cultural Philistines. Furthermore, Nietzsche's conception of himself as a psychologist put him in connection with Lear and the idea of irony as one of the tools of psychotherapeutic practice.

Chapter 2) On Integrating Genealogy and Health: *The Genealogy of Morals* as spiritual practice and its connection to irony

2.1 The Valuableness of our Values and the Project of a Genealogy of Morals

Having discussed Nietzsche's practice of irony in *DS*, I shall now take a step further and argue that this can be read in connection with his later use of genealogy. Genealogy can thus be understood as a spiritual practice, and as another technique at the ironist's disposal, which allows Nietzsche to perform something which seems to lie beyond Lear's work. While irony makes one unsure whether he is embodying his ideal of human excellence, genealogy opens up the possibility of questioning the very valuableness of one's own ideal. In other words, while irony questions one's achievement of one's own ideals, genealogy challenges those ideals themselves, questioning whether they are worthy to be pursued.

I shall begin by defending an interpretation of genealogy as a spiritual practice against other interpretations which read it primarily as a tool of historical inquiry. I shall then distinguish genealogy from irony on the ground of the kind of uncanniness they cause in their targets. Having outlined these features of the practice of genealogy, I shall explore the aspects of Nietzsche's thought which connect and sustain the practice of genealogy, such as his understanding of morality and the connection between genealogy and the will to power. I shall conclude by proposing an understanding of genealogy and irony as two complementary spiritual practices, which I shall synthesize under the name of "deconstruction."

Attacking the values of his time was arguably Nietzsche's self-appointed task. More importantly, he also stubbornly strove to make the point that values *must* be discussed. As Kevin Newmark put it, against the intellectual sleepiness of his contemporaries, Nietzsche 'tirelessly pointed out that the question of values is first and foremost precisely that, a genuine *question*. Any given system of values … has to be critically examined and interrogated before it can reasonably be accepted, maintained, or altered.'[257] Hence, just like Socrates with the Athenians, Nietzsche aimed to raise a question concerning matters that most of his contemporaries found no reason to discuss. In *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche frames the *Leitfragen* of this text as follows: 'under

[257] Newmark, *Irony on Occasion*, p. 150.

what conditions did man devise these value judgments good and evil? *And what value do they themselves possess*? Have they hitherto hindered or furthered human prosperity?' (GM 3) Along the same lines, he adds that 'we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values themselves must first be called in question* – and for that there is needed a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which they grew, under which they evolved and changed.' (GM6) Crucially, this reveals an aspect of genealogy which places it in line with Hadot's concept of spiritual exercise – namely, the fact that it serves the goal of fostering human fulness through liberation from a condition of passivity and ignorance. As I shall later discuss, Nietzsche tries to provoke this transformation by linking our morality to our instinctual life. At the same time, by treating values as the product of our instinctual development, genealogy shows their temporality and rootedness in human history; this, in Nietzsche's view ought to serve the goal of articulating possible alternatives to these values. Once we see that our values are not eternal, it is possible in principle to shape forms of life led by different moralities.[258]

2.2 Genealogy as an "imaginative framework"

I wish now to briefly consider a very common interpretation of genealogy: that is, that Nietzschean genealogy should be primarily conceived as a method of historical inquiry. If genealogy is a way of conducting historical research, this would seem to imply that it concerns activities very remote from the realm of spiritual practice, such as gathering data or investigating the development through time of phenomena. While I do not deny that there is some amount of truth in regarding genealogy in this way, I hold that this view must be qualified in order to understand what Nietzsche is doing. By doing so, I will show that genealogy can be classified as a spiritual practice.

Michel Foucault promoted a view of genealogy as opposed to history, insofar as he argued that the latter differentiates itself from the former to the extent in which history aims to find the

[258] In a reminder of his criticisms of the Philistine's separation between culture and life, Nietzsche contrasts his attitude on values with those who take the question of the value of morality with 'cheerfulness' – that is, with lightheartedness, without the necessary seriousness. In their view the question of our values' value is not one worthy to be asked. But, we can take with lightheartedness the problem of the value of our values only once we have critically examined them. Rather than indicating a state of self-forgetfulness, writes Nietzsche, '… cheerfulness … is a reward: the reward of a long, brave industrious and subterranean seriousness … (GM P:7).'

metaphysical and eternal origins of its objects of study. Instead, Foucault held that Nietzsche's genealogical practice has more to do with showing the instability and the interplay of forces which give shape to things like morality and social institutions.[259] However, Brian Leiter underlines how Nietzsche employs *Historie* and *Genealogie* interchangeably. Whatever the justification Foucault's view might have – and Leiter is ready to concede that it has some – he cannot be right concerning the opposition between history and genealogy.[260] Moreover, continues Leiter, Foucault cannot be right that genealogy reveals that its objects have no essence.[261] In this regard, Leiter notices how in the preface to *GM* Nietzsche claims that Genealogy is concerned with 'a real *history of morality*,' in contrast to any 'hypothesis-mongering.' On the ground of these claims, and of Nietzsche's statement that the genealogist is interested only 'in that which can be documented, which can actually be confirmed, and has actually existed,' (GM Pref:7) Leiter concludes that genealogy is a way of doing real history. Therefore, he argues that genealogy has the goal of reporting events and facts able to shed light on the development and nature of some sort of phenomenon.[262]

If Leiter's reading of Nietzsche is correct, it is hard to see how genealogy could be classified alongside irony, let alone any other sorts of spiritual practice such as prayer or meditation. Nonetheless, I want to point to some significant flaws in Leiter's analysis. Even if I agree with his criticism of Foucault, I think that he is too quick to identify genealogy with history. At the very least, if doing genealogy is doing history, we must clarify which concept of history is being used here: it seems implausible that *GM* is about investigating history in the same way a high-school textbook does. For instance, let us take the slave revolt, one of the "historical events" narrated by Nietzsche in his text. On one hand, we can see how his description is in some way rooted into historical events, such as the demise of the Roman empire and the defeat of the Pagan world by the hands of Christianity. On the other hand, we cannot take this to be a description of late-antiquity of the sort found in a standard history textbook.

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[259] Lear,*Irony*, pp. 16-7. 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 77.
[260] Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche On Morality* (New York: Routledge, 2002),
[261] Interestingly enough, while Alexander Nehamas' work is often a target of Leiter's criticism, Leiter and he are on the same page when it comes to criticizing Foucault's distinction between genealogy and history. Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (London: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 244-5.
[262] Ibid., pp. 166-7.

In this respect, I welcome Peter Berkowitz's suggestion that Nietzsche's histories in *GM* – the slave-revolt, the birth of bad conscience, and the rise of the ascetic ideal – 'represent a form of history that sacrifices exact historical or scientific knowledge to the accurate determination of the value of rival forms of life.'[263] It follows from Berkowitz's interpretation of genealogy that while this method is indeed rooted in historical research, it is primarily aimed to criticize some particular forms of life in favor of others. Berkowitz writes that *GM* 'is edifying poetry' containing 'sweeping narratives about great men and dastardly villains.'[264] Moreover, the language employed by Nietzsche in *GM* clearly exceeds the register of historical inquiry, presenting the character of a search for the origin of historical phenomena which is also a denuding and ridiculing.[265] I believe that Berkowitz's reading of genealogy – according to which *The Genealogy of Morals* is closer to Lucanus' *Pharsalia* rather than to Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* – does a better service to the book's polemical character than Leiter's identification of Nietzschean genealogy with history. Again, this is not to deny that Nietzsche's work is grounded in his research in historical sources, as in fact Leiter's own references to the preface of *GM* aptly demonstrate.[266] Still, with Berkovitz I believe that it is correct to emphasize how Nietzsche's use of his materials takes us in a direction different from that pursued by the academic discipline of history. Having established the polemical and poetical aspects of the practice of genealogy, let us see how these set us on course for an understanding of genealogy as a spiritual practice.

I shall begin this part of my argument by making a comparison between what Nietzsche is doing in *GM*, and what Freud does in his anthropological writings, particularly *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism.* As is widely known, in this pair of books Freud attempted to explain some features of Western civilization by drawing an analogy with themes concerning the individual psyche. In particular, he grounded his reading of social institutions, religion, and

[263] Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche On Morality* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 166. Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: the Ethics of an Immoralist* (London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 27.
[264] Ibid., p. 98.
[265] Solomon, 'Nietzsche's *ad Hominem*,' p. 204.
[266] To be fair, while not renouncing the mistaken view that genealogy is primarily a method of historical inquiry, Leiter concedes that, while *GM* treats "true events," this text cannot be considered an academic treaty. Leiter, *Nietzsche*, pp. 180-1.

morality in the Oedipus complex: just as this is a crucial phenomenon for the development of the individual psyche, so Freud thought it was the case for the broader progress of society.[267]

According to Robert A. Paul, Freud used the *Oedipus Rex* as what Clifford Geertz calls 'a story people tell about themselves,' by this meaning that the play and myth of Oedipus allow us to 'schematize and epitomize an aspect of our existence, and from this public text we learn how to understand ourselves and how to make ourselves who we are.'[268] A historical reconstruction of primeval humanity as gathered in a horde – which Freud proposed in *Totem and Taboo* and which he thought was grounded in the investigations of contemporary scientists like Darwin[269] – 'probably never existed; but it does ideally embody the *fantasy* of what any male in a sexually reproducing species like ours might *aspire* to in his narcissistic and reproductive self-interest: to father offspring by as many women as possible, and to eliminate all rival males from competition by depriving them … of reproductive potential, that is, by "castrating" them.'[270] Thus, the point of Freud's description of human social evolution is not so much to give a complete and flawless collection of facts, as to provide us with a narrative about human history that reveals and emphasizes some crucial aspects of who we are. Accordingly, while historical accuracy never falls beside the point, Freud is building what Rowan Williams calls 'a mythical correlative for his theoretical scheme,' or, an 'imaginative frameworks of interpretation.'[271]

Just as Freud recurs to one of Sophocles' tragedies and to 19th-century anthropology to explain the rise of monotheism by providing an alternative history of the people of Israel, so Nietzsche writes the story of a revolt of the "weak" against the "noble and the strong" in order to explain the birth of slave-morality. In this way, he not only produced a sort of poetical version of actual history, but he also used it as a sort of myth to tell his readers what he thinks the birth and growth of European society was really all about.[272] In reading *GM*'s stories as myths, I am

[267] Carl E. Schorske, 'Freud: the Psychoarcheology of Civilizations,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Freud*, ed. by Jerome Neu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 9.
[268] Robert A. Paul, 'Freud's Anthropology: a Reading of the "Cultural Books",' in ibid., p. 269.
[269] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 145.
[270] Ibid., p. 276.
[271] Robert A. Paul, 'Freud's Anthropology: a Reading of the "Cultural Books,"' in ibid., p. 269. 'Freudian Psychology,' in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. by Alan Richardson, John Bowden (London: SCM, 1983), p. 220.
[272] Bergmann (1988) and May (1999) also argues that the stories told by Nietzsche through the practice of genealogy have a "mythic quality."

following once more Berkowitz's suggestion, who, along with labeling *GM* as edifying poetry, also claims that genealogy concerns the creation of 'an illustrative myth or poem.'[273] This suggestion may appear dubious if we stick to the common view of myth as an untrue story. However, as Spyros D. Orfanos notes, for the Greeks 'a myth was a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form.'[274] Given Nietzsche's and Freud's interest in the Greek world, I think it is acceptable to employ this definition when applying the category of myth to their works. Moreover, the Greek definition of myth allows in principle for a connection between the myth and real events – where the latter are mythologized, or translated into a narrative and possibly poetic form in order to explain features of the narrator's reality. Hence, we do not have to choose between this reading and accepting that genealogy is indeed concerned in some way with real history. What Nietzsche is doing framing European history within the mythical and poetical narrative of the decline and weakening of the human species, inviting his readers to "look with different eyes," both at themselves and at the world they live in.

This enables us to formulate a reading of genealogy as a spiritual practice. As I have discussed in the first chapter, we can interpret irony as a spiritual exercise and psychotherapy as a form of philosophy as a way of life. Commenting on 'the legend of Anna O.'s hysterical childbirth,' Jacobsen and Shamdasani observe how this is 'a typical example of the psychoanalytic rewriting of history' and how 'here … Freud applied to the history of psychoanalysis (and later to history itself, if we consider *Totem and Taboo*, *Moses and Monotheism* and *Woodrow Wilson*) the same method of interpretation that he used in the privacy of his office to "reconstruct" his patients' forgotten and repressed memories.'[275] Accordingly, if Freud's anthropological inquiries are analogous to his interpretation of his patients' psyche, then we can claim that they represent a sort of "mass-scale psychotherapy" – that is, one aimed at healing large portions if not the whole of humanity. In this way, Freud's imaginative frameworks also belong in some way to psychotherapy; therefore, producing and applying them can be considered another sort of spiritual exercise at the therapist's disposal.

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[273] Paul, 'Freud's Anthropology,' p. 276. Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, p. 70.

[274] Rowan Williams, 'Freudian Psychology,' in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. by Alan Richardson, John Bowden (London: SCM, 1983), p. 220. Spyros D. Orfanos, 'Mythos and Logos,' in *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 16 (2006), p. 483.

[275] Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Sonu Shamdasani, *The Freud Files: an Inquiry into the History of Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 179-80.

Just as Nietzsche has his own use of irony, he found in genealogy what Freud later found in his anthropological investigations. Robert C. Solomon helpfully comments that genealogy can be understood as a 'protracted *ad hominem* argument writ large.'[276] Accordingly, we can interpret *GM* as an exercise analogous to the first of the *Untimely Meditations*, thereby reinforcing the analogy with Freud's work, which also had the therapeutic goal of shedding a provocative light on religion.[277] In fact, both Freud and Nietzsche used across their works a combination of means for reaching out to a large readership, yet addressing each reader individually, and with the goal of dispelling their delusions – whether these concerned the nature of religion, morality, or the nature of their culture. Considered in this way, genealogy is less a method of historical inquiry than a way of allowing people to grow free from their delusions and develop into better selves. This means that we can legitimately read genealogy as a spiritual practice and an element of the philosophical life. I the next sections, I shall elaborate on the distinctive features of genealogy as a spiritual exercise, and what sort of transformation Nietzsche wishes to cause in his readers.

2.3 Genealogy as a Spiritual Practice

In order to develop genealogy's particular features as a spiritual exercise, I shall first compare its effect with those of irony. I shall argue that Lear's account of irony and Nietzsche's account of genealogy converge, insofar as both practices cause an experience of uncanniness;[278] that is, both practices make something familiar unfamiliar, thereby causing a disrupting effect. In particular, I shall argue that while irony makes our ideals unfamiliar by showing that we are failing to live up to them, genealogy makes our very values unfamiliar, by showing us that they might have a very different meaning from the one we ascribe to them. As I have already discussed in the first chapter, in *A Case for Irony* Lear imagines a teacher that realizes that he is not living up to his ideal of being a good teacher. In the same situation, genealogy would expose the origins of the values regulating the teaching profession, making it possible to ask questions such as: "why should I be a teacher? Is it a good thing to embrace the values that undergird this profession?", or even the more radical "why do we assume that education has any value?" In other words, through

[276] Solomon, 'Nietzsche's *ad hominem*,' p. 204.
[277] Ibid., p. 204.
[278] David B. Allison, *Reading the New Nietzsche* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp. 246-7.

genealogy we do not realize that we are bad teachers, but rather we come to question our whole goal of being or becoming a teacher.

Like irony, genealogy ultimately holds a constructive purpose. As Robert C. Solomon's writes, Nietzsche's philosophy aims to foster 'self-examination and self-"undergoing," to "know thyself," to cultivate the virtues and, ultimately, to "become who you are."'[279] As we undergo self-examination and the de-familiarization of our values through genealogy, we become able to become who we are by transforming our values and developing new and better ways of living. However, while irony applies the Delphic maxim within the perimeter of certain values and of the pretense that manifests them, genealogy questions the very foundations of the way we live; in other words, with respect to irony genealogy represents a new level of experiencing the philosophical existence, and of engaging in our love of wisdom – one that questions in a more fundamental way whether we have achieved wisdom and humanity. From the genealogical point of view our failure to become wise and human – "to become ourselves" – is not caused by failing to achieve our ideals of human excellence, but by the problematic nature of our ideals, insofar as these come to be considered "unhealthy."

According to Peter Sloterdijk, Nietzsche himself underwent a process of transformation caused by the absorption of the discoveries of his genealogical excavations. Sloterdijk describes this development in Nietzsche's existence using the language of spiritual exercise. Nietzsche was able to achieve this new level of being by establishing an 'operating theater,' which was

'the result of an insight that Nietzsche, ever since the days of *Human, All too Human*, had made during an aggressive spiritual exercise that he carried out on himself. The author of *The Gay Science* was convinced that resentment is a mode of production of world, indeed one that is to date the most powerful and most harmful. The more keenly this discerning author contemplated the matter of this fact, the more comprehensively and monstrously it came into profile: in everything that had borne the name of high culture, religion, and morality, the resentment of world-building had prevailed. Everything that for an epoch had been to present itself as the moral world order bore its handwriting. All that had in his era claimed to be making a contribution to world improvement had drunk of its poison. Whence the catastrophic conclusion, which hit its thinker as

[279] Robert C. Solomon, 'Nietzsche's Virtues: a Personal Inquiry,' *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*, p. 127.

a millenary insight: that all languages formed by metaphysics gravitate around a misological core.'[280]

Hence, Nietzsche's works post-*Human, All Too Human* – Sloterdijk and Nietzsche himself both emphazise *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as the peak of the latter's production – are the manifestations of a change happened in their author.[281] Nietzsche's understanding of the foundations of Western civilization progressively altered his perspective. However, to disrupt the worldview of an entire society can have a wrecking effect on somebody born and reared within it. Accordingly, in order to 'resist the disruption of the hitherto known economy' Nietzsche had to strive to become 'something other than what had been known as human to date, a survivor vaccinated against the madness of the truth.'[282] His capacity to sustain a prolonged contemplation of this terrifying reality,[283] eventually transformed him, enabling him to give birth to the *Zarathustra* and his other mature works. Moreover, the necessity of mutating into a different humanity will provide Nietzsche with the foundations of his proclamation of the Overman.[284]

[280] Peter Sloterdijk, *Nietzsche Apostle* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), pp. 33-4.
[281] Interestingly, Sloterdijk locates Nietzsche's discovery of the *ressentiment* "motive" already in *Human, All too Human*, while Nietzsche himself really explores this topic in depth only in the later *Genealogy of Morals*. Whatever the truth of Sloterdijk's thesis, we can follow him in seeing the seeds of the *Genealogy*, the *Zarathustra*, and of Nietzsche's mature works in general in his previous outputs. What is really of relevance for our inquiry, is whether or not the development of Nietzsche's thought can be described as the product of spiritual practice. Ibid., p. 33.
[282] Ibid., p. 41.
[283] According to Stephen Mulhall, this capacity – typical of Nietzsche and other thinkers, such as for instance Heidegger and Wittgenstein – is itself the product of 'an intellectual practice that is also a spiritual practice … that aims to confront and internalize an idea of itself and its practitioners as ineliminably beyond our understanding – a practice of enduring and embodying the human being's constitutive resistance to its own grasp.' In Mulhall's view, Nietzsche presents human beings as structurally perverse. Hence, the pervasiveness of misological tendencies in human culture is anything but accidental: rather, it is the logical product of tendencies deeply ingrained in the human soul. Mulhall argues that this is a heritage of the Christian worldview, which survives in Nietzsche in bringing him to the conclusion that human beings are inherently fallen. Nonetheless, Nietzsche's refusal of a Creator – and of any chance of being transformed and redeemed by a divine power – would destroy any chance of understanding and solving our fallenness. Mulhall seems to agree with Sloterdijk that Nietzsche somehow learn to withstand the awareness of the truth. To which extent though was he able to see through it, to which extent was he able to vaccinate himself from resentment and self-hatred? As Mulhall puts it 'if, as Cavell suggests, the Christian's words are, from Nietzsche's point of view, the right words – if the critical task he sets himself is not to eliminate the Christian vocabulary but rather to re-cover it for a more human, a less life-denying, use – then he cannot simply abandon them. But how can he retain them and still succeed in speaking from beyond Christianity – from a perspective that can genuinely claim to have overcome the Christian inheritance?' See Stephen Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 11-2, 17-8.
[284] Sloterdijk, *Nietzsche*, p. 41.

We can dig further into the difference between irony and genealogy by recovering two terms from the Platonic dialogues, one of which I have already discussed. These terms are *aporia* and *atopia*.

2.4 On Aporia and Atopia

Borrowing a term from Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, we can use *atopia* – as distinguished from *aporia* – to describe the spiritual effects of genealogy. Where *aporia* indicates a failure to go on as usual with respect to our pretenses, *atopia* indicates a condition of inclassifiability – literally, a condition of placelessness – and under the present terms the demand on our part to redefine the whole landscape of a certain pretense. As with *aporia*, we can turn the experience of *atopia* into a tool of ironic and spiritual transformation. To embrace *atopia* is part of what it is to be a philosopher, i.e. someone on the way to achieve humanity. As mentioned above, this happens insofar as, genealogy itself is another application of the Delphic maxim which represents the "golden rule" of philosophical existence.

Just like *aporia*, also the term *atopia* is closely associated with the figure of Socrates. Accordingly, we can look to him in order to get a better grasp of what this inclassifiability consists in. In particular, we must notice that *Atopia* is normally translated as "extraordinary character," a quality that Alcibiades tributes to Socrates in the passage from the Symposium that I have already discussed in the first chapter.[285] According to Alcibiades, Socrates cannot be properly classified neither as a human being nor as a god, but rather as someone "extraordinary," who inhabits the area existing between mortals and gods. In its original context, Plato employs this term to indicate that Socrates has ascended closer to the divine wisdom than the other mortals, thereby finding himself displaced between the realm of gods and that of human beings. In this respect, Hadot argues that the whole *Symposium* can be read as framing Socrates as a 'new Eros, mediator between things human and divine, *penia* and *poros*.'[286] Because he inhabits this condition, Socrates is a stranger on earth and cannot be classified by his fellow humans.[287] My argument, is that Socrates' condition of placelessness is the same place where Nietzsche's argument that Christian

[285] Plato, *Symposium*, 214e – 215a.
[286] Sharpe, 'Socratic Ironies,' pp. 11-2.
[287] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pp. 57-58.

were born out of a slave-revolt leads.[288] (GM 1:10) Inasmuch as we are unsettled by this story, we are left in a state of *atopia*: we used to interpret our world and ourselves making reference to certain values, and now this is not possible anymore. In a Platonic sense, this means "losing our place" in the world; of course, there is a difference with respect to Socrates' condition, insofar as he chose himself to embrace the condition he finds himself in. In turn, the *atopia* caused by Nietzche's genealogy is inflicted on his readers. In this respect, we can apply the same reasoning that Lear applies to irony: just as irony is a therapeutic tool that can be adopted for self-therapy, it is possible to transform genealogy in a self-reflective exercise. This would mean routinely trace the genealogical history of our own values, prejudices, ideals, and habits, in order to maintain a fresh perspective on our quest for wisdom by being able to routinely "lose our place in the world." In other words, a re-current practice of genealogy means regularly putting into question the nature and value of our morality; it means radically re-discussing our ideals, trying to understand what is the origin of our urge to achieve them.

Having argued that genealogy can be interpreted as a spiritual exercise, and having discussed its effects, I shall now consider what sort of transformation Nietzsche sought to enact through the use of genealogy. To do so, I shall turn to Nietzsche's discussion of morality, and ask how genealogy allows us to grow beyond the borders of a "bad morality."

2.5 On the Nature of Morality

Nietzsche usually understands "morality" as the set of values commonly espoused by the European society of his day. When understood in this sense, it is safe to say that Nietzsche opposes morality and that genealogy serves the goal of undermining it. However, it is also clear that for Nietzsche European morality represents just one possible form of morality, and he himself seems to claim that he is focusing his attacks only on a specific kind of morality, as a species within a

[288] Remarkably, this shows how Nietzsche wants to causes *atopia* by exposing an earlier instance of an *atopic* situation as being at the roots of our values. In this sense, if to argue that our morality is the product of slaves' fear and *ressentiment* aims to break down our way of reading the world, not much different was what happened when Nietzsche's slaves started to argue that the masters, who thought of themselves as the good and noble ones, where instead a despotic and cruel people.

genre.[289] – and, as a matter of fact, Nietzsche's problem with European morality does not seem to be so much with its content, but rather with its claim to universality and its leveling effects.[290] For example, in the preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals* he claims that the target of the book is the value of morality, or, of 'all that has hitherto been celebrated on earth as morality.'(GM P:3) Later, Nietzsche states that in the instinct of pity he saw 'the *great* danger to mankind … the will turning *against* life' (GM P:6), and expresses the wish that one day this 'old morality' of pity might be dispensed with (GM P:7). Here we see how Nietzsche implicitly distinguishes between an old and a new morality, as well as between what has hitherto been celebrated as moral and what might be – rightfully – celebrated as such in the future. On top of this, we can also point to the subject of GM's first essay – master- and slave-morality – as indicating that Nietzsche recognized the possibility of a multiplicity of morals, not all of which were to be condemned.[291]

On the basis of the passages I have just quoted, I believe it is legitimate to identify a Nietzschean conception of morality of which pity-driven Western morality is but an instance. Richard Schacht notes the emergence of such an underlying conception of morality, claiming that 'morals … are most properly thought of as a loosely related family of *norms* pertaining to human conduct of various sorts.'[292] Moreover, Schacht adds that morals are to be seen in relationship with our 'forms or spheres of life … the various sorts of sociocultural formations and configurations … setting the contexts of the greater part of what we variously do in the course of our socio-culturally articulated lives.'[293] Therefore, morals are normative codes according to which we orientate ourselves in the context of different spheres of life.

Schacht's talk of "spheres of life" transcends our common understanding of morality, which is often restricted to the realm of rights, duties, and actions. In Schacht's sense, "morality" seems to be closer to the *mores* of the Latins or the *ethoi* of the Greeks. In other words, our family of norms is the set of values we live by in all the different situations we come to inhabit in our existence, including many areas of life that a narrow understanding of morality would not consider

[289] In any case, as Leiter notices, Nietzsche could not be a critic of *all* morality insofar as he embraces the idea of a "higher morality" and that he offers a revaluation of existing values that appears to involve appeal to broadly "moral" standards of some sort. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, p. 74.
[290] Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, p. 214.
[291] Leiter, *Nietzsche*, p. 74.
[292] Richard Schacht, 'Nietzschean Normativity,' in *Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future,* ed. by Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 157.
[293] Ibid., p. 159.

as relevant. Furthermore, to understand these *mores/ethoi* as moral standards or imperatives to which we deliberately choose to conform is to consider only one aspect of them. In fact, very often these customs constitute our unreflective habits – that is, the way in which we automatically express ourselves in a particular context.[294] Genealogy's capacity for *atopia* is grounded in its ability to expose the origin of morals. Crucially, this allows the genealogist to examine any morality from a position – that of its origins – which is connected to it, and yet escapes that morality's own criteria and orientation. This follows insofar as something's origin must lie before it. In this sense, genealogy allows us to take a standpoint which is connected to a particular morality without being internal to it. I shall now turn to explore this topic in the next two sections: first, I shall describe what notion of "origin of morality" we can obtain from Nietzsche; second, I shall discuss how genealogy can help us retrace it.

2.6 On the Origin of Morals: Freudian Love and the Will to Power

According to Nietzsche, our morals derive their normative force from the values to which they are associated.[295] However, he grounds the effort of a genealogy of morals on the assumption that the force emanating from our values finds its origin elsewhere. As Schacht put it 'for Nietzsche … all normativity is ultimately of extra-moral origin. For Nietzsche that ultimate origin – the *Ur*-source of all normativity – is to be found in the basic disposition he takes to be operative in all that transpires in this world, which he calls "will to power" and which expresses itself in the various and more specific dispositions informing our affective constitutions and lives.'[296] As with many other Nietzschean themes, we find an abundance of interpretations of what the will to power is – and what its importance might be in the economy of Nietzsche's thought. However, whatever else Nietzsche's will to power might be, I argue that there is sufficient evidence to regard it as

[294] Another interpreter who understands morality in Nietzsche as *mores/ethoi* is David B. Allison. Allison, *Reading the New Nietzsche*, p. 81. Jonathan Lear produces a similar description of the Greek notion of ethics. Furthermore, he seems to embrace such an understanding of the ethical by linking it to the birth of psychology: 'Plato and Aristotle invented psychology to vindicate the intuition that ethical life is a happy life for human beings. The word "ethical" comes from the Greek words that refer to a person's character and to social customs and practices.' Lear, *Wisdom won from Illness*, p.5.

[295] Richard Schacht, 'Nietzschean Normativity,' in *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*, p. 157.

[296] Ibid, p. 158. 'We can rise or sink to no other "reality" than the reality of our drives – for thinking is only the relationship of these drives to one another.' BGE 36.

analogous to Lear's concept of love. The content of these two concepts overlaps to a great extent; moreover, they play similar roles within their respective contexts.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes that 'granted finally that one succeeded in explaining our entire instinctual life as the development and ramification of *one* basic form of will – as will to power, as is *my* theory … the world seen from within, the world described and defined according to its "intelligible character" – it would be "will to power" and nothing else (BGE 36).' We can compare Nietzsche's remarks concerning the relationship between the world and the will to power with Lear's remarks on the necessity of the world being lovable, and on love's role in giving birth to and sustaining our psyche.[297] The will to power seems to be the name of a fundamental force responsible for the rise and deployment both of our psyche and of our world.

Moreover, love and will to power can be compared insofar as both forces push human beings toward self-transcendence. In GM Nietzsche writes that 'all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous "meaning" and "purpose" are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.'(GM 12) Hence, to be in the world is to interpret it and thereby literally "make meaning" of it.[298] If all our instinctual life is will to power, and our instinctual life belongs to the organic world, it follows that expressions of the will to power correspond to "a becoming master" and to "fresh interpretations" – processes which involve a modification of any meaning or purpose we might have been living by. This means that we become masters of ourselves and our world by producing a different interpretation of their meaning and purpose. As Robert Solomon notes, for Nietzsche interpretations do not consist simply in abstract possibilities: they are 'embodied, sometimes impassioned viewpoints.'[299] Accordingly, to embrace a different interpretation of reality means at all effects a change pretense: this will involve a change in the way we conceive and generate our life-spheres, thereby bringing about new pretenses and new

[297] Lear, *Love and its Place in Nature*, p. 142. This is a reflection of what Nehamas calls Nietzsche's aestheticism, or the idea that the world in general can be looked as to a literary text, which by its nature is interpretable in many and often diverging ways. Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, 4. This position is correctly qualified by Leiter who notices how, having Nietzsche learned to read texts from Riltsch and not Derrida, his concept of interpretation could not include the idea of vastly diverging but equally valid interpretations. Still, this does not lead necessarily to the confutation of Nehamas' idea that Nietzsche understood the world – and as we shall discuss later persons – as literary texts. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, p. 38.

[299] Solomon, 'Nietzsche's *Ad Hominem*,' p. 198.

values. In fact, values in themselves provide us with an interpretation of the world insofar as they are part of the framework through which we look at it. Therefore, to become master is the same as producing new values, insofar as doing so implies a fresh look on and interpretation of reality.[300] As Michel Harr put it, in this process our instinctual life follows the will to power's internal imperative "to be more"[301] – once again, a drive akin to love's never-exhausted push for higher levels of individuation.

What has emerged in this section is that the will to power gives birth to the self and its world, as well as to an ethical framework which bridges the two. Moreover, the will to power is an extra-moral origin of morality insofar as it moves according to its own imperative, giving birth to a morality – with its own values and imperatives – while at the same time preceding it, and thereby escaping this morality's own criteria. The normativity of the internal imperative of the will to power is translated into our ideals, which we strive to embody through our pretenses. In this sense, to fully embody our values is "to be more" – according to what this means in our own moral terms – hence satisfying indirectly the will to power's own imperative. Thus, we find numerous analogies between Lear's argument that to embody our values implies both to embody love and to extend love's augmenting action, and Nietzsche's account of the will to power.

Since the will to power is a particularly thorny issue in Nietzsche studies, I shall spend next section trying to dispel a few possible misunderstandings about the role and nature of this concept, before returning to the topic of genealogy in the following section.

2.7 On what the Origin of Morality is Not

[300] Solomon, 'Nietzsche' *ad hominem*,' p. 198. Nehamas adds on this that 'Nietzsche calls our views, practices, and modes of life "interpretations" because of the constant possibility of such readjustment, and also because he believes that every view of the world makes possible and promotes a particular kind of life and therefore presupposes and manifests specific interests and values. He calls them "interpretations" in order to call to our attention the fact that they are never detached or disinterested, that they are not objective in a traditional sense.' Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, pp. 64-5.

[301] Michel Haar, 'Nietzsche and Metaphysical Language,' in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. by David B. Allison (London: the MIT Press, 1985), p. 11. In this sense, notwithstanding the ambiguity of the topic, I believe that it is fair to say with Klossowsky that will to power is a will of self-overcoming. Pierre Klossowsky, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 79-80.

Many interpreters warn that the greatest danger in thinking about the will to power is to conceive it as an essence. As mentioned above, Foucault argues that we should not think of the work of genealogy as a search for the *essence* of morality, if by this we mean an immutable form that precedes the external world.[302] Notwithstanding my reservations about other aspects of his argument, Foucault's claim is surely correct in the light of Nietzsche's repeated assertion that everything is in a constant state of flux,[303] insofar as Foucault clearly thinks of essences as something static, and Nietzsche's proposition surely includes the will to power itself.

Given the analogies we have found between love and the will to power, I believe that we can apply to the latter some of the qualities that Lear ascribes to the Freudian concept of drive. In particular, let us recall the "border-nature" of drives. We might say that – using the vocabulary employed by Nietzsche in *BGE* – the will to power is that force which manifests in us through our instinctual life and in the world, and which becomes visible once we try to understand the world – something that in fact includes also our instinctual life – by seeking the criterion of its intelligibility. Nietzsche describes this as trying to understand the world from the inside, but we could also speak of the will to power as constituting the world's frame and that by doing so lends it intelligibility – that is, we could characterize the will to power using the same terms we used to characterize love. As that thing which frames the world and our experience of it, the will to power is neither something merely anthropic – that is, it is not just the expression of the human will and therefore a totally psychical force – nor it is some sort of life-force flowing behind the veil of phenomena – so that we could place it wholly in the extra-psychical realm. We could say that the will to power finds expression in the human psyche as a will to interpretation and mastering: in other words, the will to power's internal imperative 'to be more' manifests itself in the human psyche as a capacity for interpreting and mastering the world – including itself, as that thing which frames the world and gives it intelligibility.

As a drive, the will to power is neither a substance according to the Cartesian definition – that is, something which can exist autonomously – nor a second level of existence behind and separated from phenomena. Just like love, the will to power is a frontier creature which exists only

[302] Michael Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 78. On this, Eric Blondel claims that 'is not a matter of indicating the essence […] but of indicating a development and a derivation.' Eric Blondel, 'The Question of Genealogy,' in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, p. 310.
[303] Ivan Soll, 'Nietzsche on the Illusions of Everyday Experience,' in *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*, p. 25.

insofar as there are two realms – that of the psychological and that of the physiological. I think that this presentation of the will to power is in line with Nietzsche's critical stance towards ethical supernaturalism. The idea of an otherworldly origin of our values – what Nietzsche calls 'the typical prejudice by which metaphysicians of all ages can be recognized' (BGE 2) – comes under attack insofar as it postulates a second and eternal world beyond appearances, and claims that values come from this incorruptible realm. In turn, the border between the psychical and the physiological is no other-world. Instead, it is the liminal space which does not correspond neither to the world nor the self living in it; it is a space that exists only alongside and between them. Accordingly, although the will to power escapes the psychological and physical realities in the sense that is not included and exhausted by them, it is nevertheless something worldly insofar as it exists only by manifesting itself in these realities.

2.8 Genealogy as Interpretation of Interpretations

Arguing that genealogy does not aim to discover essences lying behind the veil of phenomena, Foucault proposes a reading of genealogy as the practice of uncovering the 'descent' and 'emergence' of morals rather than their origin – or, their *Herkunft* and *Entstehung* rather than their *Ursprung.* By 'descent,' Foucault means 'the discovery, under the unique aspect of a trait or a concept, of the myriad events through which – thanks to which, against which – they were formed.'[304] Hence, genealogy does not merely show the connection between a particular morality and certain historical events. Insofar as these are manifestations of the will to power – which as such is always oriented toward the transcendence of itself, that is, of some particular form of being master – they always represent the striving of a certain "line" of the will to power to be "more." Genealogy allows us to see and articulate the nature of a particular morality by showing the direction of the manifestations of the will to power which brought it about. Hence, to take Nietzsche's example, the slave-revolt is precisely an event in which the slaves are driven by the will to power to overcome their condition of weakness. By revolting against the masters, the slaves express a new morality, which puts their oppressors in a position of inferiority.[305]

With respect to the question of the 'emergence' of a particular morality, genealogy shows us which expressions of the will to power gave birth to our morality, while determining their

[304] Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' p. 81.
[305] Ibid., p. 81.

conditions of emergence – that is, it can show us which existential conditions brought about these expressions of the will to power. In Foucault's words, 'emergence is always produced through a particular stage of forces, the analysis of *Entstehung* must delineate this interaction,'[306] Moreover, he distinguishes descent from emergence, insofar as 'descent qualifies the strength or weakness of an instinct … emergence designates a place of confrontation.'[307] Hence, genealogy as descent underlines certain manifestations of the will to power, bringing to light their power as they manage to express themselves above all the others. In turn, genealogy as emergence identifies the conditions for such thing to happen: for instance, the relationship of domination of the masters on the slaves is one condition of emergence of the slave revolt. As the two groups face one another, this creates the energy and space necessary for the slaves to express themselves creatively and overcome their own condition, thereby establishing supremacy over the masters.

We can find a justification for Foucault's choice of the terms 'descent' and 'emergence' in the following passages: in *GM* Nietzsche claims that

'We have no right to *isolated* acts of any kind: we may not make isolated errors or hit upon isolated truths. Rather do our ideas our values, our yeas and nays, our ifs and buts, grow out of us with the necessity with which a tree bears fruit – related and each with an affinity to each, and evidence of *one* will, *one* health, *one* soil, *one* sun.' (GM 2)

In *Beyond Good and Evil* he affirms how

'individual concepts are not something arbitrary, something growing up autonomously, but on the contrary grow up connected and related to one another; that, however suddenly and arbitrarily they appear to emerge in the history of thought, they none the less belong just as much to a system as for the members of the fauna of a continent.' (BGE 20)

Here, we see how Nietzsche discusses the birth and development of values and concepts using the vocabulary of organic growth. If we really wish to understand our values, we cannot study them in isolation: we must contextualize them with respect to their descent as if they were fruits coming from some tree, as well as with respect to the conditions that made them possible, just as certain geographical features allow for the survival only of certain types of organisms.

[306] Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,' pp. 83-4.
[307] Ibid., pp. 83-4.

Genealogy addresses its objects as if they were organic beings whose natural constitution has to be explained with reference to the factors that brought them about and allowed them to persist.

From these passages we can also see how, even when values do not openly show their origins, they are nonetheless dependant and shaped by them. After all, the soil of a plant is a very different thing from the plant itself, but we have to understand the former to see why the latter has such and such features: as much as an apple does not resemble an apple-tree, studying one can tell us a lot about the other. It works just the same with genealogy and values. For instance, as much as pity might not manifest openly its dependence on slave-morality and *ressentiment*, Nietzsche is arguing that between them holds the same relationship existing between an apple-tree and its fruits. In this sense, genealogy is a reading of morals as a set of signs bearing references to their conditions of existence. Hence, genealogy does not resemble only the study of biological beings, but, insofar as it studies these beings as signs, it is a semiological activity – a *deciphering* of the conditions of development of a particular morality –[308] which treats values as signs and the expressions of the will to power as their referents.[309]

Accordingly, we can think of genealogy as the act of interpreting an interpretation. Crucially, in the preface to *GM* Nietzsche ascribes his interest in morality to a '*fundamental will* of knowledge.' (GM p:2-3) In other words, he understands his genealogical enterprise as a form of will and therefore as an expression of his instinctual life. This implies that genealogy and morals are expressions of the same forces, in that they are both produced by our instincts. This brings two more implications: first, genealogy becomes itself an expression of the will to power inasmuch as it is an expression of our instinctual life; second, if every process in the organic world – and this surely includes the manifestations of our instinctual life – is a subduing and a becoming master, this means that genealogy is also a form of becoming master and therefore an interpretation. Insofar as morals are interpretations, genealogy is then an interpretation of interpretations. The first interpretation provides the *Herkunft* and *Enstehung* of the second, thereby interpreting it on the ground of its pre-moral origins and apart from any story a certain moral code might tell about its own origins.[310]

[308] David B. Allison, 'Introduction,' in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. by David B. Allison (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985) pp. XX-XXI.
[309] Michel Haar, 'Nietzsche and Metaphysical Language,' in ibid. p. 16.
[310] Eric Blondel, 'The Question of Genealogy,' in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, p. 312.

2.9 Health and the Will to Power

We have seen that irony is exercised out of loyalty toward some sort of ideal: irony's targets suffer from a crisis of meaning which enables them to embrace more deeply their own ideals. In general, this loyalty is present in all spiritual practices, even if – like in the case of genealogy – they work on and destabilize the ideals themselves: in some sense, they all help transforming one's own existence *for the better*, by creating the condition for a transition towards a wiser form of life. In the following discussion I will focus on what "for the better" means for Nietzsche. As we will see, my argument depends directly on my interpretation of genealogy.

In keeping with his use of biological terms, Nietzsche portrays the genealogist-philosopher as a physician. Concerned with the health of his patients, the physician searches for the roots of their values, in order to address how far these are conducive to either 'bad or good health.'[311] Hence, the question concerning the valuableness of our values, will ask which of our values manifest an expression of the will to power leading to a "healthy" form of life. Of course, the problem is how to differentiate between different expressions of the will to power. In fact, even slave-morality – something which Nietzsche deeply despises – is the result of the will to power 's successful affirmation. Hence, it is not immediately clear why, if we follow Nietzsche in his diagnosis, we should not accept slave morality. A similar point could be made concerning Lear's meta-psychological ontology: if all values come from love's constructive efforts, does this mean that all values stand on an equal footing? Lear's own position seems to be that developing into higher stages of individuality is better than not, hence, values that favor individualization should be preferred over values which do not.[312] Love can develop within us in a "degenerate" way, that is, by producing values that bring about an interpretation of the individual and his world, but which at the same lack objectivity and prevent the individual from developing any further. The exercise of psychoanalysis can help us clear our perspective on what it means to live well, and therefore on which values we should embrace.[313] Freedom as the final cause of psychoanalysis is another discriminating agent: 'we can evaluate an approach not only in terms of how well it discloses what

[311] Ulrich Haase, *Starting with Nietzsche* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 4. See also Michel Haar, 'Nietzsche and Metaphysical Language,' p. 12.
[312] Lear, *Love and its Place in Nature*, 142*passim*.
[313] Lear, *Wisdom won from Illness*, p. 18.

is already going on in the analysand's psyche, but also how well it facilitates the analysand's movement in the direction of psychic well-being'[314] – that is, in the direction of freedom, insofar as this is conducive to psychic well-being.

A similar point can be made concerning Nietzsche's will to power. In this case, the question is whether a certain set of values helps to further the will to power's imperative to be more.[315] As David Ciuzens Hoy puts it, given that the normative codes produced by the will to power are our interpretations of ourselves and our environment, 'healthful interpretations [are] those that set out the conditions for finding their own inadequacies, and the strategies for revising themselves.'[316] Accordingly, the difference between healthy and sickly expressions of the will to power would be that the former are conducive to a prosecution of the will to power's tendency to expansion and self-expression, whereas the latter only lead to self-denial – thereby effectively putting a halt to humanity's capacity for self-expression and self-overcoming. Thus, just as we should favor expressions of love which are conducive to even higher expressions of love, so we must do so with those of the will to power.[317] **This also implies underlining a crucial distinction present within Nietzsche's criticism of asceticism. The latter is not criticized in itself, insofar as this is the manifestation of a vertical tension towards a higher form of life. Rather – following Sloterdijk's suggestion – our analysis of the will to power should lead us to differentiate between good asceticism and bad asceticism – where the former is an expression of the healthy desire to grow through spiritual exercise and the latter is the prosecution of the sick desire for revenge.[318] This intuition is confirmed by Nietzsche's own claim – contained in a notebook from 1887 – 'I also want to make asceticism natural again: in place of the aim of denial, the aim of strengthening.'[319]**

Hence, just as Lear believes that we must keep reiterating irony in order to prevent our delusions from re-forming, making us both complacent and mistaken about having fully achieved humanity, and thereby halting love's work and the process of individuation. Similarly, the practice

[314] Lear, *Wisdom won from Illness*, p. 151.
[315] Haase, *Nietzsche*, p. 14.
[316] David Ciuzens Hoy, 'Nietzsche, Hume, and the Genealogical Method,' in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's 'Genealogy of Morals,'* p. 265.
[317] Ibid., p. 265.
[318] Sloterdijk, *You Must Change your Life*, p. 33.
[319] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, ed. by Walter Kaufman, trans. by Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 483.

of genealogy is also open-ended: it must be continued lest we decide to give up on the question of value, risking being enslaved by life-denying moral codes. In fact, this has to do with the nature of the will to power itself. As Klossowsky notes, for Nietzsche power 'resists everything, except that it cannot resist itself. It must act ... it must provoke in order not to be provoked. This is why there is "will" to power: power wills itself as power, and cannot not will itself.' [320] The will to power disrupts by its very nature any 'conservation of an attained level, since by necessity it will always exceed this level through its own increase.' [321] In order to follow the will to power's pace, we should never stop at a certain level of interpretation, refraining from exploring and re-interpreting our values. Even if we live by values which promote self-overcoming, this will lead to new forms of life with their normative codes: these too must be examined, in order to determine their freedom from regressive tendencies.[322] Hence, genealogy is a means through which the philosopher can remain vigilant, checking that he never settles within an unhealthy paradigm. The philosopher can employ genealogy to examine the emergence and descent of his values, so that he can gain insight into their healthiness and discern whether he needs to outgrow them or not.

2.10 Deconstruction

To conclude this discussion of genealogy, I would like to propose a possible way of integrating the practices of irony and genealogy. This must be understood within our broader discussion of the philosophical life: seeking an integration between the practices of genealogy and irony is a way of adding an element to our understanding of what it may mean to live philosophically today. In my understanding, genealogy can be understood as working in parallel with irony. While irony allows us to address the way we embody our ideals, this might be simply

[320] Klossowsky, *Nietzsche*, p. 68.

[321] Ibid., pp. 79-80. On his own part, Sloterdijk argues that within a Nietzschean understanding of what it means for life to affirm itself – which in this context is the same as talking of what it means for the Will to Power to affirm itself – 'the bigger the resistance provoked by the affirmation, the more authentic its occurrence.' He adds that 'one might call the language-traces of such a life Spinozist since they are "expressions" in the sense that they serve to announce a force of being.' It would of great interest to investigate the parallels between Nietzsche's and Spinoza's view of life, power, and affirmation. Superficially, there seems to be a great area of mutual agreement on the fact that for life to affirm itself means to become more powerful, and that to become more powerful is to become the whole. However, this is another topic for another thesis. Sloterdijk, *Nietzsche*, pp. 55-6.

[322] Paraphrasing Nehamas, we tend to forget that views are interpretations, and we tend to mistake them as objective and transparent facts, perceivable as such before and beyond any question of interpretation. Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, pp. 32-3.

starting to "scratch the surface," the initial revelation of deeper problems. Perhaps, we fail to achieve our ideals because these ideals themselves need to be changed: they might be impossible to achieve, outdated, incoherent; or – and this is the charge Nietzsche levels against traditional morality – they might be plainly negative and unhealthy, being the result of our worst instincts. In this sense, even if we are actually succeeding at embodying our ideals, genealogy could show that after all this is not a good thing; that is, that even if we are achieving our ideals of human excellence, we are nonetheless failing to achieve wisdom and live a distinctively human life, because we have an unhealthy understanding of human existence.

I claim that we find an instance of irony being practiced alongside genealogy at the very beginning of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where we find Nietzsche proclaiming

'we are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge – and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves – how could it happen that we should ever *find* ourselves? … there is only one thing we really care about from the heart – "bringing something home." Whatever else there is in life, so-called "experiences" – which of us has sufficient earnestness for them? Or sufficient time? Present experience has, I am afraid, always found us "absent-minded" … so we are necessarily strangers to ourselves (GM P:1).'

Here we find irony – "we think we are people of knowledge but we are not" – followed by genealogy – "we promote an ideal of knowledge which disregards an important side of our existence, which is that of having *experiences* and because of this we cannot truly be men of knowledge." Accordingly, not only we should think twice about our pretense of being people of knowledge, but we should also reconsider our very ideal of knowledge: perhaps we should re-consider its meaning, or question whether it should be pursued at all.

One way of framing what irony and genealogy accomplish together is by using the concept of deconstruction. As defined by Kevin Newmark, deconstruction 'is not just philosophy, or literature, or theology, political science, psychoanalysis, history, or any other cognitive field of inquiry, but is rather the critical analysis of what truly happens in all of them.'[323] Analogously, I believe it is fair to say that both Nietzsche's and Lear's interest in spiritual exercises is born from the capacity of these techniques to tell us what is really going on within ourselves. We could say

[323] Newmark, *Irony on Occasion*, p. 157.

that genealogy and irony represent two different sides of the practice of deconstruction insofar as they show the real relationship between ourselves, our values, our pretenses, and our humanity. On the one hand, irony functions as deconstruction by telling us what really happens in our pretense, namely that we are failing to live up to our ideals of human excellence. On the other hand, genealogy works as deconstruction by telling us the real nature of our normative codes, showing us which aspects of our instinctual life they are expressing, how this situation came to be, and whether or not they are healthy.

Chapter 3) On Teaching Greatness to Oneself and to Others: Zarathustra prophet of the overhuman and his connection to the existential ideal of the ironist

6.1 A Commitment to Greatness: on Becoming Oneself and the Goal of the Philosophical Life in Nietzsche

I shall now leave behind my discussion of genealogy and take a further step into Nietzsche's thought. In particular, I shall address the question of what sort of form of life Nietzsche has in view as the goal of philosophy and of spiritual practice. Having offered a few remarks concerning the nature of healthy interpretations and values, I now want to ask what sort of individual is produced by powerful and healthy interpretations. I think that the process of becoming such a person can be summed up by the expression 'becoming oneself,' present in the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*, that is, Nietzsche's autobiography and final publication. In order to make sense of such an expression, I shall begin by looking at the figure of Zarathustra.[324] This choice is motivated by the fact that, borrowing Sloterdijk's words, Zarathustra is the voice of Nietzsche's message, an evangelist that calls to 'know oneself; [to] take a stand against the millenaries-old forces of reversal, against everything that has been called Gospel to date.'[325] I think that Zarathustra represents someone who has become himself, and who we can regard as an instance of what we can and ought become through spiritual practice. In this sense, we can speak of Zarathustra as a paragon of philosophical life. I shall first look at the figure of Zarathustra himself, exploring the dynamic that according to Nietzsche makes him what he is, that is, a "great human being." Then I will discuss how Zarathustra can act as an exemplar, thereby representing the goal of the philosopher's spiritual practice. Finally, I will inquire with more depth into the nature of Zarathustra's greatness, arguing that this flows from his ability to gather and represent the whole of what there is into himself.

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[324] The often overlooked matter of the relationship between Nietzsche's and the historical Zarathustra is masterfully discussed by Paul S. McDonald in 'Nietzsche, the Avesta and Zarathustra,' available at https://www.academia.edu/17462590/Nietzsche_the_Avesta_and_Zarathustra and by David Aiken in "Nietzsche and his Zarathustra: A Western Poet's Transformation of an Eastern Priest and Prophet," in *Zeitschrift fur Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 4 (2003).

[325] Sloterdijk, *Nietzsche*, pp. 36-7. 'It is noteworthy that Nietzsche often refers to Thus Spoke Zarathustra using a religious vocabulary, calling it a "book of devotion and encouragement" a "testament," and a "fifth Gospel."' Ibid., p. 35.

In reading *Ecce Homo*, I follow Daniel Conway's suggestion that we should understand *Ecce Homo* as a genealogy of Nietzsche himself.[326] This exercise in genealogy differs from the ones we find in *GM* to the extent that its goal is as it were illustrative, rather than critical. In other words, Nietzsche's interest here lies in composing the history of his life, discussing the role that certain significant events played in his existence in shaping his personality and intelligence, giving particular attention to his own books. This exercise in self-exploration deserves the name of genealogy, insofar as it treats Nietzsche's personality at the time of *Ecce Homo* as the result of what happened earlier in his life. In the terms employed by Nietzsche in *GM*, past events are genealogically connected to Nietzsche's present personality like roots are connected to branches and fruits. In other words, while in *GM* the work of genealogy was at the service of building a critical interpretation of Christianity, of the ascetic ideal, etc., in *EH* genealogy is undertaken with the goal of producing a "positive" interpretation, able to integrate the different sides of a person's background. Furthermore, in *EH* Nietzsche's deconstructive effort aims to interpret his life in the light of who he became, thereby saying "this is what really was going on when I did X." In other words, in *EH* Nietzsche deconstructs the apparent unrelatedness of the elements comprising his current form-of-life by showing their connection with events in his past history, arguing that what was really going on in each of these was the formation of some aspect of his character, so that after all they were necessary to him being who he is.

In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche presents Zarathustra as a typological figure, and he claims that in order to understand this type, 'one has first to become clear as to its physiological presupposition: it is which I call *great health*.' (EH 2:10) We have seen how health corresponds to the cultivation of healthy interpretations – that is, those expressions of the will to power which are conducive to even greater expressions of the same – and the discarding of unhealthy ones. More specifically, here we find Nietzsche saying that 'great health' is the physiological presupposition of the type of person which Zarathustra stands for. Hence, Nietzsche is approaching Zarathustra in a genealogical way, asking what sort of *Herkunft* should we adjudicate to Zarathustra's values. The answer is great health – just as cowardice and the repression of creativity together were the *Herkunft* of the cultural Philistine. It follows that to develop a Zarathustra-like personality we need the ability to manifest and persevere in maintaining ever greater degrees of will to power.

[326] Daniel W. Conway, 'Genealogy and Critical Method,' in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, p. 323.

Later in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes that his formula for greatness in human being is '*amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity. Not merely to endure that which happens of necessity, still less to dissemble it … but to *love* it.' (EH 10:2) Applying the notion of *amor fati* to Zarathustra, Nietzsche articulates his conception of Zarathustra as the greatly healthy one by writing that he 'delineates reality *as it is*: he is strong enough for it – he is not estranged from or entranced by it, he is *reality itself*, he still has all that is fearful and questionable in reality in him, *only thus can man possess greatness*.' (EH 5:15) These two passages suggest that Zarathustra's great health consists in the capacity to love both reality and himself for what they are: this allows Zarathustra to grow stronger by unifying into a whole – that is, himself – all aspects of his personality, good or bad, and develop them. This happens within a broader interpretation of reality that is the result of Zarathustra's hermeneutical ability, which has been sharpened by spiritual practice and the multiple reiteration of irony and genealogy. By practicing the philosophical life and the necessary discernment that comes with spiritual practice, Zarathustra has deconstructed things so that he can see them for what they are; at the same time, no matter how much reality is harsh, he loves the events composing his life, insofar as they are his faith. In contrast to the cultural Philistine, Zarathustra's ability to take reality seriously in all its negativity, and to hold together everything that he is in a single and reiterated act of spiritual affirmation, allows him to be healthy and to grow in health. Hence, great health is based on clear-sightedness, on having a vision trained by philosophical practice able to discern reality as it is in relation to our values and our humanity. In a way, we are returning to Kierkegaard's image of Napoleon: seeing reality as it is – and accepting it as it is – is the requisite for growing in humanity and subjectivity. By seeing the true nature of reality and of our personal history, and wishing that nothing had been different but rather loving every bit of it we become one with reality and with ourselves. Thereby – insofar as Nietzsche considers all reality to be will to power – we become one with the will to power.

In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche claims that Zarathustra is '*affirmative* to the point of justifying, of redeeming even the entire past … to *redeem the past* and to transform every "it was" into an "I wanted it thus!"' (EH 8:10) By refusing to give up anything of his personality and experience – insofar as every small detail coalesced in himself and let him be who he is – Zarathustra is free from any life-denying instinct; by being able to transform everything which happened in his life into something willed by him, Zarathustra is capable of exercising that mastery of life which,

according to Nietzsche, defines a healthy interpretation. Thus, he becomes able to produce other healthy interpretations, persevering in pursuing the imperative to "be more" that is propelled by the will to power. Eventually this prompts Zarathustra into reaching out to others.[327]

How then does Nietzsche's description of Zarathustra illuminate the meaning of the expression 'becoming oneself?' In order to investigate this point, we need to look at *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; there, we find that the Persian prophet eulogizes what we may call the "uniqueness of virtue." In one instance he addresses the reader saying 'my brother, if you have a virtue, and it is your virtue, then you have her in common with no one else … may your virtue be too lofty for the familiarity of names: and if you must talk about her, be not ashamed to stammer about her. So speak and stammer: "this is *my* good, this I love; thus it pleases me fully, thus alone I do/want the good (Z 1:5).'" In this passage Nietzsche equates one's virtue with the good, so that to cultivate

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[327] In this sense, we can interpret Zarathustra's speech to the sun, at the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

'Thou great star! What would be thy happiness if thou hadst not those for whom thou shinest!
For ten years hast thou climbed hither unto my cave: thou wouldst have wearied of thy light and of the journey, had it not been for me, mine eagle, and my serpent.
But we awaited thee every morning, took from thee thine overflow and blessed thee for it.
Lo! I am weary of my wisdom, like the bee that hath gathered too much honey; I need hands outstretched to take it.
I would fain bestow and distribute, until the wise have once more become joyous in their folly, and the poor happy in their riches.
Therefore must I descend into the deep: as thou doest in the evening, when thou goest behind the sea, and givest light also to the nether-world, thou exuberant star!
Like thee must I GO DOWN, as men say, to whom I shall descend.
Bless me, then, thou tranquil eye, that canst behold even the greatest happiness without envy!
Bless the cup that is about to overflow, that the water may flow golden out of it, and carry everywhere the reflection of thy bliss!
Lo! This cup is again going to empty itself, and Zarathustra is again going to be a man.
Thus began Zarathustra's down-going.' (Z:1)

In *Ecce Homo*, Zarathustra proclaims his love for those, apart from himself, who are able to express such mastery. 'I love him whose soul is overfull, so that he forgets himself, and all things are in him: thus all things become his going-under.' (Z 1:4).

On this, see Sloterdijk, *Nietzsche*, p. 80: Nietzsche
'does not know of symmetrical discussions, negotiation, of the middle-value between banalities, but instead of inter-solar relations, the traffic of rays from star to star, the penetration from viscera to viscera, being pregnant and making-pregnant. "In the belly of the whale I become the herald of life." His interest lies not in opinions but in emanations. On an intellectual level he is a radical bisexual, a star which fevers to be penetrated, and a sun which penetrates and "prevails." I am penetrated, therefore I am; I radiate in you, therefore you are. By sexualizing the sun, he reverses the direction of imitation and compels the sun to become the imitator of people, provided that the individual is an author – that is, one who is penetrated by language, by music, a voice, which seeks ears and creates them.'

one is to cultivate the other. Given Nietzsche's familiarity with the Greek world and language, we can assume that he had the Greek concept of virtue as excellence (*arete*) in mind. This concept of virtue as excellence, allows us to clarify the passage: if each one of us has his own way of being excellent, this can be his and nobody else's – insofar as each individual is the unique product of unique circumstances – and to nurture his own excellence is to nurture his own specific human good or specific way of being excellent and virtuous. Using Lear's vocabulary, Nietzsche argues that each one of us has a particular way of being good at being a human being.

Let us now join Zarathustra's claim about virtue with Nietzsche's considerations about his figure in *Ecce Homo*. If to cultivate one's own virtue is the same thing as cultivating one's own particular way of being good at being human, then it follows that by cultivating virtue we become ourselves, in the sense that we achieve our own subjectivity in the fullness of its being. However, we can only do so by displaying *amor fati* as an attitude toward life. This is because to love fate is to love and affirm those events that came to constitute ourselves for who we are. By doing this we become reality: we close the gap between how we understand ourselves and who we are – that is, we develop a correct interpretation, something which allows us to get in tune with reality – allowing us to tap into the will to power and affirming the intensity of our subjectivity and of our world. We can shed further light on this point by looking to what Nietzsche takes to be the origin of virtue: 'when you are willers of one will, and this turning of all need is for you called necessity: there lies the origin of your virtue.' (Z 1:15.1) To be of one will is to unify our life experience and to accept it as a necessity, as that particular set of circumstances that made us who we are. Zarathustra comes to call this act redemption, insofar as it is what redeems 'coincidence,' recreating 'all "it was" into a "thus I willed it!"' (Z 2:20) Hence, to love fate is to make peace with ourselves and desire to be who we are rather than regretting our past or hoping to be someone else. By loving fate, we can accept that the virtue which we can potentially express is our own virtue, and that to pursue it is to become ourselves.

Nietzsche's view of virtue connects to his concept of unity of style. According to Thomas Leddy, Nietzsche maintained his concept of unity of style throughout his middle period.[328]

[328] Leddy quotes from *The Gay Science* – '*One thing is needful* – to 'give style' to one's character – a great and rare art! … in the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small' – (*GS*, 290) and from *The Case of Wagner* – 'What us the mark of *literary*

Furthermore, I believe that we can find it resonating in *Ecce Homo*: by looking back at his life, Nietzsche presents the reader with a unitary picture, gathering everything in his experience into the unity of the form-of-life of the man who is writing *Ecce Homo*. Moreover, he closely associates the publication of his books to developments in his character and way of life, thereby attempting to overcome the separation between theory and practice which he criticized in Strauss and his followers. This separation was a consequence of their lack of unity of style; to overcome this gap between one's own beliefs and one's own existence is to strive for style and organic unity. In this sense, then, the mastery which *GM* talks about concerns building an interpretation that can organically hold together the different elements or aspects of one's existence. By doing so, one is able to create a unity of style, not being separated anymore from portions of his individuality and personal history. Thereby, one becomes oneself. Interestingly, Stanley Cavell forwards a similar understanding of the Nietzschean term of mastery, which I have introduced in the previous discussion of genealogy. As he put it, 'to "master" … is not exactly to overcome … an unruly impulse or an insubordinate slave, but to have command … as of a difficult text or of language.'[329] Then *Ecce Homo* works as an interpretation where what is interpreted is taken up, retold, and integrated in a single interpretation which stamps its component with the mark of necessity.[330] To do so, is to master the 'difficult text' of our existence, managing to interpret so as to show the trajectory that brought us about, and set the terms for our potential achievement of virtue. To love this trajectory, the circumstances that constellate it, and finally to strive to increase the power expressed by this trajectory and become ourselves, is that which Nietzsche calls *amor fati*.

In conclusion, I would like to underline how, if my interpretation of Nietzsche's exploration of becoming oneself is sound, it is possible to read him as a moral perfectionist. According to Stanley Cavell, moral perfectionism is a way of thinking that insists on 'the moral necessity of

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decadence? That life no longer resides in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, and the page comes to life at the expense of the whole – the whole is no longer the whole. This however is the simile of every style of decadence: every time there is an anarchy of atoms' – (*CW*, section 7). Leddy, 'Nietzsche on Unity of Style,' p. 564.

[329] Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 13.

[330] On mastery see also Haar, 'Nietzsche and Metaphysical Language,' in *The New Nietzsche*, p. 22. See also Sloterdijk, *Nietzsche*, p. 65-6: 'if, today, one hundred years after Nietzsche's death, we look back at this author for authors and non-authors and grasp his place in his time, we become aware that Nietzsche for all his claims to originality and despite his pride at being the first in essential things was in many respects actually only a privileged medium for the execution of tendencies that in one way or another would have forged ahead without him. His achievement consists in knowing how to transform an accident of the name Fredrich Nietzsche into an event, provided that we understand by event the potentiation of the accidental into the destinal.'

making oneself intelligible' or 'becoming intelligible to oneself.'[331] In this light, we can see the connection between Nietzsche's reflection on human greatness and this intellectual paradigm.[332] This is important, insofar as the quest for intelligibility typical of the moral perfectionist allows us to link Nietzsche's reflection on virtue and becoming oneself to his definition of will-to-power. Nonetheless, we have to introduce a qualification: Nietzsche understands the achievement of selfhood as replacing one form of intelligibility with a different one, rather than as a movement from unintelligibility to intelligibility. This follows insofar as to understand oneself under the sign of stylistically disunited chaos implies intelligibility. We can be intelligible to ourselves even as a pile of randomly associated experiences, habits, and opinions. It is perfectly possible to apply to Nietzsche's philosophical practice the Cavellian insight that 'perfectionism's emphasis on culture or cultivation is … to be understood in connection with this search for intelligibility, or say this search for direction in what seems a scene of moral chaos, the scene of the dark place in which one has lost one's way.'[333] However, the "scene of moral chaos" cannot be identified with Nietzsche's description of the Straussian man of culture, who is perfectly intelligible to himself. Instead, the scene of moral chaos is one in which the Straussian man of culture is successfully struck by Nietzsche's deconstructionist practice, and who is struggling to find himself having lost the false assurance of being a cultivated individual. Hence, the movement is from one intelligibility to another, passing through a moment of *aporetic* and/or *atopic* chaos.

While the effort to master one's inward chaos works backward – from the present to the past – it is at the same time an endless project. As Nehamas correctly points out, the process of

[331] Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: the Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. xxxi-ii.

[332] As regards the definition of Moral Perfectionism, Cavell writes that 'perfectionism … is not a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought and concerns what used to be called the state of one's soul, a dimension that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one's society.' Ibid., p. 2. In this sense, the paradigm of Moral Perfectionism can be understood as analogous to Hadot's idea of philosophy as a way of life. Just like the latter, Moral Perfectionism is a way of doing philosophy rather than some particular theory, and is essentially worried with questions of self-transformation, and how philosophical theory and concepts can be applied to one's existence. What distinguishes someone embracing Moral Perfectionism or who, more in general, practices philosophy as a way of life, is not a particular set of ideas or some content, but rather a particular attitude towards the practice of thinking, as well as a certain relationship between theory and practice. Furthermore, Emerson establishes a direct connection between Emersonian Perfectionism and Nietzsche's thought by arguing that the perfectionist quest can be called that of 'becoming what one is,' thereby clearly echoing the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*. Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, p. 184.

[333] Ibid., p. xxxii. A scene of moral bewilderment which recalls Dante's situation at the beginning of the *Divine Comedy* and the providential appearance of Virgil.

unification of one's subjectivity must continually mediate one's own past with the modification and additions that come from one's present. New character traits must be included in the unity that one keeps on establishing. We made a similar point in our discussion of *DS*, hence we see once again how *EH* is tied to Nietzsche's concept of unity of style.[334] In this view, the self – or, one's being-oneself-ness – is always in a sense already attained, and yet in another sense it is always needful to be attained. As Nehamas emphasizes, a self 'according to Nietzsche, is not a constant, stable entity. On the contrary, it is something one becomes, something, he would even say, one constructs.'[335] Each state of the self is final only insofar as no further state has been achieved – something which happens only in death or perhaps in extremely severe physical or psychological injury.[336] Hence Zarathustra is a self, insofar as he is able to harmonize the different elements that make up his own being – this, as opposed to anyone who simply exists being nothing but a jumble of different and uncoordinated pieces.[337] This way, by being a self, he is also himself – or, he has become himself – insofar as there is no separation or disconnection between the different sides of his existence: his existence is all in all that of the self which is made up by his past and present experiences. This is the perpetual goal of the philosophical existence in Nietzsche.

6.2 Zarathustra as a Teacher

Having seen how Nietzsche conceives the goal of the philosophical life, I shall now discuss how others should be introduced to this kind of existence, through the figure of Zarathustra.

Emphasizing the uniqueness of virtue, Zarathustra states that '"this – is just *my* way: - where is yours?" Thus I answered those who asked of me "the way." For *the* way – does not exist!' (Z 2:11.2) He maintains that 'there are many different paths and ways of overcoming – look *you* to them!' (Z 2:12.4) These different paths, could be potentially as numerous as the number of human beings: each one of us is the result of a different set of conditions, each of which produces a different life and a different personality; it follows that each single human being has to find the way to overcome his own sense of being the product of coincidence, as well as any refusal on his

[334] Alexander Nehamas, quoted in Leddy, *Nietzsche on Unity of Style*, p. 556.
[335] Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 12.
[336] Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, p. 7.
[337] Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome,* pp. 3-4.

part of certain elements of his experience. For Nietzsche, each individual must find his own way to human greatness by finding his own way to virtue and single-willfulness.[338]

Clearly, there is a tension here traversing Nietzsche's discourse. On the one hand, the task of becoming oneself is understood as being strictly personal. At the same time, by pointing to Zarathustra as an example of human greatness, it seems that Nietzsche is also implying that we can find inspiration and guidance in someone else's achievement of greatness. In order to dissolve this tension, it is necessary to articulate how Zarathustra can function as a paragon for human greatness. In other words, we have to question how we can relate to Zarathustra, insofar as he represents what everyone should aim for, while we neither can nor should literally aim to become like him. This is also a question concerning how the ironist should lead his own therapy. Nietzsche is presenting Zarathustra as both an ideal and a spokesperson for his teachings: he is the archetype of the person living on healthy interpretations, free from otherworldly hope and *ressentiment*, as well as a preacher of the gospel of "oneselfness." However, such an ideal figure can emerge only after the ironic-genealogical work against unhealthy interpretations has been accomplished. Thus, to wonder how we can learn from Zarathustra is to wonder how the ironist should introduce and articulate a new ideal for his target – as well as for himself.

A further complication is introduced by the fact that, as Nehamas remarks, Nietzsche seems to allow that there are a variety of ways in which one can become an admirable person. Nehamas argues that whoever is admirable is the one who Nietzsche would call an 'individual' – namely, somebody who has become an individual by becoming oneself.[339] However, Nehamas goes on to highlight how 'the very notion of an individual is one that essentially refuses to be spelled out in informative terms. To give general directions for becoming an individual is surely self-defeating.'[340] In other words, if to become an individual is understood as becoming oneself, it is impossible from Nietzsche's perspective to give any prescription beyond the exercise of *Amor Fati*. What this means in practice cannot be foreseen, as each self shall possess a different and unique personal history. As Nehamas puts it, 'a true individual is precisely one who is different from the rest of the world, and there is no formula, no set of rules, no code of conduct that can

[338] This I take to mean the overcoming of a view of one's life as coincidence rather than necessity and as something that ought to be different rather than being lovable as it is.
[339] Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, p. 8.
[340] Ibid., p. 8.

possibly capture in informative terms what it is to be like that. There are no principles that we can follow in order to become, as Nietzsche wants us to become, unique.'[341] While the prescription of *Amor Fati* and the rejection of mercy and priestly asceticism sound like they are prescriptions for individuation, it is certainly true that the process of individuation cannot be simply commanded through a series of impersonal "oughts."[342]

I believe that a solution to this tension can be found in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Here we find Zarathustra himself stating 'let Zarathustra not talk to the people, but to companions! Zarathustra shall not become shepherd and sheepdog to a herd! … Whom do [the herdsmen] hate the most? The one who breaks their tablets of values, the breaker, the lawbreaker – yet that is the creator. Companions the creator seeks and not corpses, nor herds or believers either. Fellow creators the creator seeks … with the creators, the harvester, the celebrants will I make company: the rainbow will show them and all the stairways to the Overhuman.' (Z 1:9) Companions – as opposed to the 'people' and the 'herd' - are in Zarathustra's words those 'who follow me because they want to follow themselves.' (Z 1:9) If 'the herd' were to associate with Zarathustra, it would just try to adopt his own virtue as its own; thereby, the people making up the herd would fail to become themselves. On the other hand, companions are those who find in Zarathustra the inspiration to become great on their own terms.

Once again, in order to better understand this point, we can return to Cavell and his concept of moral perfectionism. Just after discussing the perfectionist emphasis on the quest for intelligibility, Cavell remarks on 'the importance to perfectionism of the friend, the figure, let us say, whose conviction in one's moral intelligibility draw one to discover it, to find words and deeds in which to express.'[343] Zarathustra is that friend, who knows that human beings – notwithstanding their abasement – are potential companions to him, and who stands there in order to spark that flame of greatness they bear within themselves.[344] We can also link the status of companionship to a comment made by Cavell on Emerson concerning the attained and the unattained self:

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[341] Nehamas, *Nietzsche*, p. 225.

[342] Notwithstanding his criticism of Nehamas's interpretation of Nietzsche, Brian Leiter's own take on Nietzsche and morality meets Nehamas's on this point. According to Leiter, through genealogy Nietzsche aimed at liberating the higher men from the illusion that morality – that is, the idea that there is a moral code universally valid and good for everyone – is something they should regard as positive for them. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, p. 28.

[343] Ibid., p. xxxii.

[344] Peter Sloterdijk identifies a similar figure in the trainer, that is, 'the one who wants me to want – he embodies the voice that can say to me: "You must change your life."' Sloterdijk, *You Must Change your Life*, p. 55.

according to Cavell, to recognize the unattained self is already a step towards attaining it.[345] By seeing in Zarathustra the possibility of our unattained self, we might become his companions. Once we have done so, while we still have to achieve human greatness, we have already been drawn outside the herd, as we are now on a quest for becoming ourselves.

Support for the use of Cavellian vocabulary in this context can be found in James Conant's reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator* – the third of the *Untimely Meditations*.[346] Drawing on Conant – who is here discussing the relationship between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche – we can say that Zarathustra acts as an exemplar, who 'discloses to you your own "higher self" – which is "as yet still concealed" from you.'[347] As a human being who wholly accepts his own existence, Zarathustra shows us an analogy for who we might be – namely, our own higher self, which we cannot see yet. Zarathustra awakens what Conant calls a sense of shame, as an emotion that allows to 'overcome (or avoid) a false sense of virtue … the exposure of counterfeit self-respect.'[348] For Conant, exemplars are those individuals able to trigger this sense of shame in us.[349]

This shame can be understood as a companion to what Lear calls the uncanniness which follows the experience of irony: it is another reaction taking place when we fall into *aporia* and/or *atopia*. By encountering an exemplar, we come to see how in comparison to him we are not managing to be ourselves; accordingly, our pretense comes to break down as we feel the discrepancy between our previous sense of having achieved humanity or "oneselfness", and the reality of our failure in doing so. In the presence of Zarathustra his companions develop what Conant styles as a sense of unsatisfaction, which arises with the realization that "they are not themselves."[350] To follow an exemplar 'is not a matter of following in someone's footsteps … but of regarding someone as an exemplary instance of … "faithfully following in one's *own* footsteps."' [351] In other words, to be inspired by Zarathustra should not flow into a desire of literally becoming like Zarathustra, but rather by a wish to achieve that overcoming which he achieved, in

[345] Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 12.b
[346] Regarding this text, Cavell argues that it is 'to an as yet undisclosed extent, a transcription and elaboration of Emersonian passages.' Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 49.
[347] James Conant, 'Nietzsche's Perfectionism: a Reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator*,' in *Nietzsche's Postmoralism*, p. 202.
[348] Conant, 'Nietzsche's Perfectionism,' p. 205.
[349] Ibid., pp. 205-6.
[350] Ibid., p. 196-7.
[351] Ibid., p. 206.

a way suitable to our own circumstances. This is the difference between plagiarizing and being inspired by somebody: when doing the former, we copy and paste a work of art, without attempting any original re-elaboration of the theme; when doing the latter, we are inspired by someone else's work to produce our own masterpiece.[352] **Within this picture Zarathustra is able to awaken what Sloterdijk calls a 'vertical tension,' or 'the inherent awareness of vital asymmetry'[353] – which in the present terms should be understood as an asymmetry between our perceived and our actual level of healthiness. By being an exemplar of healthiness, Zarathustra not only awakens in us the shame of not being healthy as he is, but he is also able to provide us with a 'secure sense of above and below.'[354] Metaphorically, he provides us with the sense of the height separating ourselves from ourselves, as well as giving us an idea of the ladder that we have to build in order close this gap.**

6.3 Becoming Oneself as Becoming the Universe

The view of Zarathustra as an exemplar sheds light on Nietzsche and his practice as an ironist and philosopher. Zarathustra acts as an ironic device: ideally, he is meant to confront us with the reality of our failure to be ourselves, to engender in us a sense of shame and dissatisfaction towards our current condition. This should cause us to renew a commitment to the philosophical life and toward achieving oneselfness. Just like Socrates for Lear and many others – perhaps including Nietzsche himself – Zarathustra acts as an example of what a human being could and should be, enabling us to move in the same direction. Zarathustra both instantiates the pattern of what the ironist and the ironized – and any other human being – should become, as well as being the ironist himself who strives to start this motion toward achieving a higher individuality. Nietzsche stands to Zarathustra somewhat like Plato stands to Socrates, in the sense that both Nietzsche's Zarathustra and Plato's Socrates are literary interpretations of historical individuals, who expressed through their existences an ideal of human excellence. At the same time, they were employed as literary and philosophical instruments aimed at causing the desire to achieve such an ideal.

[352] Conant, 'Nietzsche's Perfectionism,' p. 206.
[353] Sloterdijk, *You Must Change your Life*, p. 56.
[354] Ibid., p. 56.

To conclude this chapter, I want to point to another aspect of Nietzsche's ideal of human greatness, which I believe resonates with themes already encountered in my discussion of Lear. Above, I have explored the connection between Lear's *A Case for Irony* and *Love and its Place in Nature*, and argued for a reading of Lear's notion of achieving humanity as achieving an increasingly complex and organized self. According to Lear, this process is furthered by the creative push of the erotic drive. Thus, to become human is to become an erotic individual, in the sense that the erotic drive's action becomes increasingly manifest and intense in our subjectivity. However, to become erotic is in some sense to become a representation and embodiment of nature as a whole, insofar as Lear reads the erotic drive as a psychological and physical manifestation of a force which structures and animates reality itself. In the preceding sections I have argued that Lear's erotic drive bears a resemblance to Nietzsche's will to power, both on a structural level – that is, the role they play within their respective conceptual frameworks – as well as on the level of their content. Accordingly, I want now to spell with more care a thesis which I have begun developing in my discussion of Nietzsche: to become oneself is to become the will to power. As I have discussed above, Nietzsche considers the will to power to be what reality amounts to. For Nietzsche to become the will to power is to become reality, and to become oneself – the individual – is to become the universal – that is, the totality of reality as will to power.[355]

In his introduction to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Graham Parkes makes a couple of important remarks concerning the nature of interpretation and *amor fati*. Parkes understands *amor fati* as involving 'saying Yes to everything that has contributed to any single moment of one's life that one wants to affirm,' [356] which means affirming the eternal recurrence of everything. This follows, insofar as Parkes understands the idea of eternal recurrence as implying the 'whole interconnection of all things.'[357] As much as eternal recurrence can be one of those "foggy Nietzschean topics," I believe that Parkes's view is substantiated by what Nietzsche writes on the subject. *Zarathustra*

[355] Had Nietzsche himself reached such a condition? Sloterdijk's words seem to imply that his answer could be "yes:" 'perhaps we ought to permit ourselves to remark that, as an author of German language and European syntax, Nietzsche reached the pinnacle. In his culminations as thinker-singer, he could feel himself to be an organon of the universe, creating sites of self-affirmation in individuals,' Sloterdijk, *Nietzsche*, p. 82. Should we then consider Nietzsche a "natural mystic?" Tempting as it is, I shall leave this question out of my consideration, hoping to have provided some food for the interested reader's thought.

[356] Graham Parkes, 'Introduction,' in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: a Book for Everyone and Nobody*, trans. By Graham Parkes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. xxiv-xxv.

[357] Ibid., pp. xxiv-xxv.

asks 'Did you ever say Yes to a single joy? Oh, my friends, then you said Yes to *all* woe as well. All things are chained together, entwined, in love – if you ever wanted one time a second time… then you wanted *it all* back! – All anew, all eternally, all chained together, entwined, in love, then you *loved* the world.' (Z 2:19.10) If everything is connected to everything else, any moment of my life is connected to all that has been. From my point of view, this represents the story leading up to me living in the present moment. At the same time, any moment in my existence has to be connected to all that will be insofar as this will be the unfolding of the consequences of this moment.[358] Hence, whatever else the eternal return may be, I believe that Parkes is correct in seeing Nietzsche as teaching the interconnected nature of reality through this expression. By affirming any moment of my life, I am bound to affirm all that has been and all that will be; as the last line from the passage above suggests, this affirmation is an act of love. Here, we find yet another resonance between affirmation, will to power, and love.

In an addition to *The Joyful Science*, Nietzsche suggests that 'all existence is essentially interpreting existence.'[359] Parkes suggests that we read this claim as meaning that

'if all existence is interpreting, then all phenomena are expressing through their existence: "*This* is what it means to be" – or rather "become." A rock asserts itself as a paradigm of elemental solidity. Where vegetation prevails is the claim: *these* processes, we plants are what sun and earth, water and air, really are becoming. […] Animals supervene, intimating: *this* is what vegetation can become, as they incorporate and assimilate denizens of the plant realms. And humans, presenting themselves as the ultimate embodiment of mineral, vegetal, and animal, represent the grandest interpretation of all.'[360]

I believe that Parkes' insight is supported by Nietzsche's claim that 'the Overhuman is the sense of the earth' (Z 1, 3) and that to stay true to the earth it is to let the Overhuman be the sense of the earth. We can read the expression 'being the sense of the earth' as implying the possibility

[358] As Alexander Nehamas puts it: 'The ideal of eternal recurrence: … every single aspect of an individual life is equally essential to that life being what it is; also, … every single aspect of the whole world is equally essential to that life being what it is. To want, therefore, even a single moment of one's life to recur is to want the whole world, exactly has it has been, to recur again.' Alexander Nehamas, 'Who are "The Philosophers of the Future?" A Reading of *Beyond Good and Evil*,' in *Reading Nietzsche*, ed. by Robert C. Solomon & Kathleen M. Higgins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 61.
[359] Parkes, 'Introduction,' xxiii.
[360] Ibid., p. xxii.

that, by producing an interpretation of himself, a person expresses what the earth – clearly a metaphor for reality as a whole – is. If a rock is a paradigm of solidity by showing what it means to be solid, the Overhuman is the paradigm of existence by showing what it means to be *the all* – that is, with reference to earth itself. However, if all of reality is will to power, then to show what it means to be the all is to show what it means to be will to power. Hence, the Overhuman represents the all, insofar as he has mastered himself in producing a healthy interpretation of his own existence, and through this of *all* existence. This ability to be conscious interpreters differentiates human beings from other creatures. Overhumans are the sense of the earth insofar as they consciously interpret themselves as synecdoches – that is, parts of a set which are able to stand for the set – or, embodiments of the interconnectedness of everything. This is the product of their undertaking a philosophical existence and of their repeated spiritual efforts: to become an individual is to become the universal.

Parkes is talking about "simple" human beings while Nietzsche is talking about the Overhuman. However, I believe that in a way what can be said for the latter is also valid for the former. As mentioned above, in *EH* Nietzsche claims that because of his great health Zarathustra 'is reality itself' insofar as he understands reality for what it is and therefore suffers no estrangement from it. I think that this condition falls under the description of what it means to be the sense of the earth, insofar as being able to understand reality for what it is implies necessarily the capacity for grasping how things connect to one another, and how they interact to produce ourselves – that is, how it is the case that we are the product of the earth. So, there is a sense in which Zarathustra, and indeed anybody else who might attain human greatness, is "just like" an Overhuman. Nonetheless, we must stay faithful to the letter of Nietzsche's work, which clearly states that Zarathustra and all who might be just like him are not Overhumans, but just great human beings. (see Z 1:19)

But what differentiates Zarathustra from the Overhuman? Assuming that being a great human being means being less than an Overhuman, we could say that a human being can be the sense of the earth, although in an inferior way to the Overhuman. Hence, it seems that while Nietzsche understands the Overhuman to be the most truthful interpretation of everything, he seems to leave room for different and less truthful interpretations. If this is a sound line of

reasoning, then we could read the figure of "*the last human*"[361] as the least truthful interpretation of the earth. Between the last human and the Overhuman we find a full spectrum of interpretations which we can suppose show varying levels of human greatness. Given the limitations intrinsic to the human condition, each human being is inescapably representing the universal in a personal and individual way – in other words, more superficial and less comprehensive interpretations of the interconnectedness of all reality, shall necessarily result in less than complete synecdoches of the whole.

Again, Cavell's work on Emerson can help us to shed further light on what is going on in Nietzsche. Meditating on Emerson's essay "Experience", Cavell comments that

'we are in a state of "romance" with the universe […] we do not possess it, but our life is to return to it, to respond to its contesting for my attention, in ever-widening circles, "onward and onward," but with as directed a goal as any quest can have; in the present case, until "the soul attains her due sphericity." Until then … you can say the soul is solipsistic … partial. … This no doubt implies that we do not have a universe as it is in itself. But this implication is nothing: we do not have selves in themselves either. The universe *is* what constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions. It is what *can* be all the ways we know it to be, which is to say, all the ways we can be … the universe contains all the colors it wears. That it can wear no more than I can give is a fact of what Emerson calls my poverty.'[362]

Although the terminology is quite different from Nietzsche's, I believe that "partiality" is a perfectly fitting term for describing the human being who still has to say yes to the whole of his existence. This person is able to cope only with part of his experience, while at the same denying the necessity of some events in his life – perhaps because of their painfulness. At the same time, if one's interpretation of oneself is always an interpretation of the whole, partiality towards oneself will mean partiality towards everything else; the denial or misunderstandings of some aspects of our existence will be the denial or misunderstannding of some aspects of existence in general, as they come to be interpreted under the sign of negation or of lack of mastery. From a Nietzschean point of view then, poverty is foremostly the poverty of our interpretations, and their incapacity to embrace and give stylistic unity to all aspects of existence – and therefore their possible failure in

[361] See Nietzsche (Z5).
[362] Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, p. 13.

integrating new developments in whatever kind of self-intelligibility we might have previously achieved. To become as great as Zarathustra is to proceed onward until one is able to say yes to all and to turn everything in a necessity. In this way, the individual achieves "sphericity" and universality, thanks to its ability to embrace all aspects of being through its own individuality. By seeing all the colors of the universe and by loving them in their fatefulness, we come to reflect these colors by our connection to everything that there is. So, as much as we stay finite and limited, we become spherical or complete as we leave nothing outside. Nonetheless, we are just capable to recapitulate the universal in us. We remain partial, insofar as we are unable to represent the universal in, as it were, a universal way, but we just do so according to the uniqueness of our virtue – that is, of who we are. In line with Nietzschean perspectivism, we still live through our point of view on reality, and in this sense, we represent the whole according to our style. Nonetheless, by saying yes to all, our perspective becomes potentially all-embracing and bears resemblance to all that there is, and to its nature, by becoming an image of the whole as will to power.

What is then the difference between a great human being and the Overhuman? Even the greatest of human beings, let us say Zarathustra, is somebody who has become so, and who must keep on striving to increase his greatness. If he stops doing so, his power and greatness will eventually fade away, his love will grow weak, as new elements encounter him, adding to his own individuality without fitting into his personality and corroding his style. Since Zarathustra's messianic language often seems to introduce the Overhuman as a different stage of being, we could suppose that to be the Overhuman is a condition expressed by *just being* great, without any striving or philosophical practice needed to achieve it. While the philosopher loves and seeks wisdom, the Overhuman *is* wisdom, he simply *is* a perfect embodiment and recapitulation of the whole. However, at the moment we can only present this proposal as a (hopefully reasonable) speculation. On this note, let us leave Nietzsche behind and move on to Kierkegaard.

PART 3:

THE SINGLE, THE TEACHER, THE CROWD:

KIERKEGAARD'S CHRIST-ORIENTED IRONY AND ATTACK ON CHRISTENDOM

Chapter 1) On why Christendom is a Disease and how to Heal from it: Kierkegaard's criticism of culture, in connection with his practice of irony and his theory of communication

1.1 The Present Age, Its Sickness

In this third and last portion of this work, I shall focus my attention on Kierkegaard. Even though Kierkegaard's thought has already figured heavily in my exposition, I wish now to consider directly his own practice of philosophy and his use of irony,[363] connecting it to other distinctive elements of his thought and writing style. The goal will be that of showing how the whole of Kierkegaard's philosophical enterprise is organized around the ironist's task of awakening his targets to their unrealized humanity. In particular, I will discuss three areas: Kierkegaard's distinction between direct and indirect communication, his self-understanding as a religious poet,

[363] It must be noticed that in describing Kierkegaard's use of irony, I am always making reference to Lear's account of this concept. Hence, if I read Lear correctly in that he is grounding the practice of irony in the instantiation of an aporetic event, my aim is to show that Kierkegaard is also trying to provoke *aporia* in his own readers. As much as Kierkegaard's own account of irony has influenced Lear, his use of the word irony is somewhat more limited – insofar as for example it is different in content from the related concept of 'humour.' In this work I shall neither directly discuss the nature of humour, nor its relationship to irony. It suffices to say, that I understand Humour to be a different name for irony, when the latter is practiced in some particular occasion – specifically, from the point of view of the boundary between the ethical and the religious life. Accordingly, I understand humour to work just as another instance of irony – where the latter is understood following Lear. For a full treatment of the distinction and relationship between the categories of irony and humour in Kierkegaard, see John Lippit, *Humour and Irony in Kierkegaard's Thought* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). It should also be noted that in a passage from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Kierkegaard proposes a definition of irony which could be read in such a way that allows us to see humour as a further specification of irony: 'Irony is an *existence-determination*, so nothing is more ridiculous than to suppose it to be a figure of speech … anyone who has essential irony has it all day long and is not tied to any specific form, because it is the infinite within him. Irony is cultivation of the spirit and therefore follows next after immediacy; then comes the ethicist, then the humorist, then the religious person.' Elsewhere in the same text, humour is defined as 'the cultivation of spirit in putting together the relation to the absolute with childlikeness.' Accordingly, we can see that for Kierkegaard both irony and humour are concerned with refining one's own existence. Moreover, humour consists in de-familiarizing something that otherwise may become too familiar – in other words, to always look at the absolute with childish wonder, as if it were always the first time we got a glimpse of the absolute – thereby, making humour something that can be described as provoking the same uncanniness of irony. See *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 422, 461.

and finally his use of the theme of *Imitatio Christi*. In other words, I shall discuss the shape of Kierkegaard's ironic practice, his personal interpretation of the figure of the ironist, and the ideal towards which he hopes to prompt his readers.

With respect to the topic of direct and indirect communication, I shall draw particularly on Kierkegaard's writings concerning his own authorship, such as *On my Work as an Author* and *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, as well as to his late *Attack Upon Christendom*, linking them to Kierkegaard's *Two Ages* and *The Sickness unto Death*. I will show how Kierkegaard thought that the critical condition of Danish society as outlined in *Two Ages* called for an ironic and Socratic intervention, conjugated in a Christian way. In particular, I hold that Kierkegaard criticizes his age and contemporaries on two points, which we could call the two symptoms of the disease of the present age: 1) they delude themselves of having already achieved human excellence and 2) lack passion for achieving human excellence. My argument is that Kierkegaard intertwines the practices of direct and indirect communication as two different ironic strategies which can be used to deal with the disease and its symptoms. On the one hand, indirect communication can cause what Edward F. Mooney calls a "change of affect," [364] discussing various forms of human life and opening to the receiver of the communication the possibility of considering whether or not he is living a distinctively human life. At the same time, this turning towards the ideal elicits a passion for overcoming ourselves, thereby eclipsing our illusory self-image according to which we have already achieved ideality. **On the other hand, Kierkegaard's direct communications – at least up until *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* – are examples of what Lear calls a restricted instance of irony. In other words, where the indirect and pseudonymous communications aim to cause an aporetic shock in their receivers, direct communications such as those represented by the *Upbuilding Discourses* aim to improve the receivers relationship to a new paradigm of understanding human excellence.** While different in nature and method, both direct and indirect communication are useful means to deal with the symptoms of the malaise of the present age. Kierkegaard's practice of irony is thus twofold in the way it is communicated, and aims at an equally twofold problem affecting 19th-century Denmark and Christendom.

[364] Edward F. Mooney, 'Pseudonyms and "Style,"' in *Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, ed. by John Lippit and George Pattison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 202(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 206.

Kierkegaard was inspired by Socrates' philosophical practice to become to the Danes of the 19th century what the Greek philosopher was to the Athenians of the classical age. Like Socrates, Kierkegaard was concerned with the failure of his contemporaries to achieve human excellence, and was worried with the existential flattening that he could see taking place around him. Furthermore, Kierkegaard saw that not just the Danes but all the populations of European Christendom were caught by this nihilistic melancholy and general lack of passion for life. [365] As I think shall become apparent by my discussion of his works, Kierkegaard intertwines the task of becoming human with that of becoming a Christian. Just as 5th century BC Athenians did not bother to ask themselves whether they had achieved humanity, so 19th century Danes were sure about their Christianity insofar as they were born in a Christian country. Just as Socrates set out to lead the Athenians to reconsider their condition and to take up a practice of self-examination and passionate search for human excellence, so Kierkegaard wanted to open his contemporaries' eyes to how in fact they were not Christians, and how they needed to engage with the task of becoming Christians. This is the reflection of both his religious concerns and faith, and of the material conditions of his epoch – that is, that European society was as a matter of fact conceptualized as co-extensive with Christianity. Therefore, employing Hadot's terminology, we could say that his criticism of the foolish life is also a criticism of a false way of living the Christian life, and that to Kierkegaard the achievement of wisdom is intertwine with one's growth in the Christian life.

I shall now start my discussion of Kierkegaard's diagnosis of the malaise of the present age by looking at the first of the two symptoms which he came to identify – that is, his contemporaries' failure to achieve a distinctively human life. However, in order to do so, I must first discuss Kierkegaard's notion of selfhood, and how this connects to the task of achieving a distinctively human life. In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard writes that 'a human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis.'[366] George Pattison comments this definition by claiming that 'the self, is not to be construed in terms of some pre-existent essence or nature, but as the free and active process whereby the differentiated structures of the self are brought into a unity … that exists only as the free synthesizing action of the self, as a constantly repeated event.'[367] If we follow Pattison's

[365] Clare Carlisle, *Kierkegaard: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 22.
[366] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 13.
[367] George Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 62-3.

interpretation, we obtain that Kierkegaard thought of selfhood as something that must be achieved. At the same time, insofar as speaks of human being in general, it follows that the task of developing such a self is a task that all human beings have to face. This means that to achieve selfhood is to actualize our own deeper nature and identity, and Kierkegaard frames the task of becoming human as that of becoming a self, or – borrowing Nietzsche's words – with that of becoming oneself.[368]

Of course, one could object to Kierkegaard that no human being lacks a self and a sense of selfhood, unless of course we are not speaking of a fetus or of an individual who has been extremely damaged both physically and psychically. However, I do not think that Kierkegaard overlooked such an obvious objection; and I do not think that such a blunt interpretation of his words would be correct. Instead, I think that just as Lear distinguishes between a sense in which we are simply born human and one in which we become fully human by achieving excellence at being human beings, Kierkegaard too seems to be implicitly distinguishing between two meanings of selfhood. If the self is both a synthesis and something that must be achieved, it follows that there are different degrees of excellence in achieving selfhood and in becoming oneself.[369] In this respect, Sheridan Hough writes that while human beings are born, selves are the fruits of creative acts – accordingly, we can deduce that there are different levels of skillfulness at performing creative acts.[370] In conclusion, we could say that normally human beings are born with the capacity of being at least sufficiently creative as to produce some elementary level of selfhood. Furthermore, under Kierkegaard's definition of the self as a synthesis, we can conclude that human beings are born with a connection to the different elements constituting the synthesis – finitude and infinity, time and eternity, etc. . They intrinsically possess such a connection: even when they are impaired from forming a self, this is not due to the lack of the necessary components that may produce the synthesis, but rather on the contingent situation that prevents a particular human being from being able to perform the operation through which the synthesis is created.

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[368] Pattison, *The Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, pp. 30, 33.

[369] This can be noticed when we consider the nature and identity of Kierkegaard's various pseudonyms. As John J. Davenport puts it, 'the full range of ontological development in Kierkegaard's various accounts implies that there is room for a human person to have acquired a 'self' without having yet become a fully authentic self in faith. While Kierkegaard and his major pseudonyms often refer to people as lacking 'a self' (*selv*), they also frequently refer to an inauthentic 'self,' or to more deficient versus more adequate forms of 'self.' John J. Davenport, 'Selfhood and "Spirit,"' *Oxford Handbook of Kierkegaard*, p. 231.

[370] Sheridan Hough, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector: Faith, Finitude, and Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 23.

Another element that we should take into consideration in order to understand Kierkegaard's analysis of selfhood, is his underlining the fact of that – being temporal creatures – our existence is always subject to change and therefore is a perpetually open project.[371] This means that, whatever the degree in which we achieve our selfhood, this is never a permanent result, insofar as it can never permanently secured, and is susceptible to be augmented. Moreover, we take into consideration that Kierkegaard conceives Christianity primarily as a way of living one's life inwardly in relationship to God, and he understands this relationship in the form of a movement, which becomes part of the dynamic process of each person's life.[372] I think that we can apply to the inward movement of becoming a Christian the same considerations I have just made about one's own achievement of selfhood. In other words, to become a Christian is also a movement towards an ever-increasing depth in our relationship with God, that however can never be totally secured as long as we are exposed to temporal conditions. This process, destined to end with the conclusion of our mortal life, clearly calls for a remarkable passion for human excellence, as well as for the constant seeking-out of our current imperfections and limitations. This helps us to make sense of Kierkegaard's Socratic accusation against his contemporaries: he claimed that they had given up on the perpetual task of becoming human, ceasing to care for their relationship with God; they assumed that they have achieved excellence in the Christian life and that they have managed to secure this excellence for good.

I shall now turn to the second symptom identified by Kierkegaard: the Danes' lack of a passion for excellence. In the literary review published under the title of *Two Ages*, Kierkegaard writes that the 'the present age is essentially a *sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence*.'[373] He claims that this lack of passion and tendency to over-reflection weaken the individual's capacity for decision. As Kierkegaard put it 'the presence of the crucial either/or depends upon the individual's own impassioned desire directed toward acting decisively … but as soon as the individual no longer has essential enthusiasm in his passion but is spoiled by letting his understanding frustrate him every time he is going to act, he never in his life discovers the disjunction.'[374] According to Jacob

[371] Hough, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector* pp. 40-1.
[372] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard: a Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 25.
[373] Søren Kierkegaard, *Two Ages: the Ages of Revolution and the Present Age, a Literary Review*, ed. and transl. by Howard V. Hong and Edna V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 68.
[374] Ibid., p. 68.

Golomb, the either/or disjunction exposed in *Two Ages* is not the distinction between different spheres of existence described by Kierkegaard in earlier works, but rather that between becoming self-less and developing an authentic individuality 'by committing the "leap of enthusiasm," the "leap into the arms of God."'[375]

Be as it may, what we can deduct from Kierkegaard's words is that the conditions necessary for making a radical choice between discordant existential choices can be encountered only by the individuals who are driven by a passion for humanity. The latter must be of such an intensity that opens to the passionate individuals the possibility of making a decision between two or more exclusive alternatives, a decision in which the depth of the individual's own humanity is at stake. Without the presence of such a passion, the forms, expressions, and customs resulting from a more passionate age can still circulate, and yet they lack substantiality and effectually unable to produce individuals capable of achieving human excellence. Subsequently, as Kierkegaard put it, in the present age 'there is no hero, no lover, no thinker, no knight of faith, no great humanitarian, no person in despair to vouch for their validity by having primitively experienced them.'[376] In such a condition, the best an individual can aim for is a 'wittiness that possesses no assets,'[377] that is, the insight typical of the cynical and skeptical intellectual who is able to see the meaninglessness and vanity of his times, but who neither embodies nor is able to communicate any alternative to the existential poverty of the age. Against such an existential posture, Kierkegaard claims that only an individual 'made whole by a passionate commitment, is able to make the kinds of qualitative distinctions that the present age rejects.'[378] Under the present terms, we could say that people with

[375] Jacob Golomb, 'Kierkegaard's Ironic Ladder to Authentic Faith,' in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 2 (1992), pp. 66-7. While I believe that Golomb introduces a crucial specification in underlining this distinction between two different disjunctive dynamics, I think that he is wrong to distinguish to neatly between the Two Ages and Either/Or. In particular, he identifies too quickly the 'crucial either/or' with the choice in favor of the religious life. Rather, I think that by this Kierkegaard means a broader distinction between a leveled and ultimately meaningless life and one which is instead marked by strong existential intensity – this of course includes the religious life. I think that this is supported by the fact that the forms-of-life that cannot take place within Christendom include some figures which are not necessarily religiously characterized – that is, the thinker, the humanitarian, the lover, etc. . Moreover, This passage of the *Two Ages* resonates with the language of employed by Judge William in the second volume of *Either/Or*: 'Rather than designating the choice between good and evil, my Either/Or designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out. Here the question is under what qualifications one will view all existence and personally live. That the person who chooses good and evil chooses the good is indeed true, but only later does this become manifest, for the esthetic is not evil but the indifferent.' Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, p. 219.

[376] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, pp. 74-5.

[377] Ibid., p. 74.

[378] Hough, *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector*, p. 21.

a low-intensity attachment to their ideals of human excellence shall be harder to expose to the aporetic effects of irony. This follows insofar as irony presupposes a passion for humanity. Furthermore, a passion for achieving human excellence is necessary for somebody who is experiencing *aporia* to come out of this situation strengthening his capacity to achieve his ideals.

The two symptoms discussed by Kierkegaard reinforce one another. Lacking passion, the individual is discouraged from questioning his own existential condition, and the collective delusion prevents anyone from developing a passion for achieving fullness, insofar as this is assumed to have been already attained. On the basis of this diagnosis, Kierkegaard the Christian Socrates sets himself two different tasks: 1) to entice in his contemporaries a passion for the achievement of full humanity, and 2) to break their delusion that they already manifest human excellence. Under the terms of the present work, I claim that this is the way in which Kierkegaard frames the task of the ironist. To point to the unachieved humanity of his contemporaries, or to try to arouse in them a passion for higher states of being, means in both cases causing an ironic shaking of their social practices. Both procedures require the ironist to point out how the pretenses of his contemporaries include social practices which fail to instantiate their own ideals – so that on the one hand we can develop a passion for fullness, realizing that this has not yet been achieved, and on the other hand we can break free from the illusion of being fully human by seeing the shortcomings of our practical identity.

Having outlined Kierkegaard's Socratic case against his contemporaries, I wish now to address his practice of irony with particular reference to his employment of direct and indirect communication. In particular, I shall show how both communicative practices serve Kierkegaard's goal of counteracting the sickness of the present age.

1.2 Direct and Indirect Communication in Relationship to Irony

The nature of the relationship between the direct and indirect styles of communication is a matter of great discussion among Kierkegaard scholars.[379] Here I will focus on *The Point of View*

[379] For a short but thorough summary of Kierkegaard's different takes on direct/indirect communication, see Antony Aumann, 'Kierkegaard on Indirect Communication, the Crowd, and a Monstrous Illusion,' in *Kierkegaard International Commentary: The Point of View*, ed. by Robert L. Perkins (Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 2010),

on My Work as an Author, a text which presents Kierkegaard's own reflection on his authorship, as well as presenting a statement and clarification of the religious nature of his work. *The Point of View* was written in 1848 and published only partially in 1851 – full publication was to follow posthumously in 1859. This means that by the time of its partial publication Kierkegaard had already published most of his major works, and had already produced the vast majority of his pseudonymous output – that is, up to and including the "Anti-Climacus works." Accordingly, we can say that Kierkegaard's discussion of his authorship in *The Point of View* can be validly assumed for most of his production, with the notable exclusion of his famous "attack upon Christendom." Nonetheless, for reasons that will become clear during the course of my exposition, Kierkegaard was specifically concerned with the connections between his religious and upbuilding works, with the pseudonymous and esthetic ones. This would seem to exclude the Anti-Climacus works, which are noteworthy for being at one time pseudonymous and religious. Nonetheless, we should notice that *The Sickness Unto Death* was published in 1849 and *Practice in Christianity* in 1850 – that is, both books published under the Anti-Climacus pseudonymous fall after the date of the original composition of *The Point of View*.

I realize that my enquiry demands taking a stance on the vexed question concerning whether we should trust Kierkegaard's own self-description. Personally, I follow George Pattison in imagining Kierkegaard

'as a thinker engaged in an ongoing quest to gain clarity and understanding about the meaning of his own words and works, a quest that involved him in experimenting with a variety of self-representations and points of view … in this light Kierkegaard's various self-representations may be read not so much as definitive "reports to history" (his own subtitle for *The Point of View*) as questions, hypotheses, experiments in interpretation – remembering that even in that most "direct" of all Kierkegaardian texts, *The Point of View*, he acknowledged that it was only as a reader of his own works that he really came to understand what they meant.'[380] Accordingly, I take Kierkegaard's reconstructions of his authorship in

p. 295. Also, see Jamie Turnbull, 'Communication/Indirect Communication,' in *Kierkegaard's Concepts*, *Tome II: Classicism to Enthusiasm*, ed. by Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and J. Stewart (Farnham: Ashgate, 1988), p. 17.

[380] George Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, theology, literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 18.

***The Point of View* as a *prima-facie* plausible interpretation of his authorship. At the same time, I hope that the cogency of my argument will lend credibility to my methodological choice.**

In order to understand the way in which Kierkegaard discusses the categories of Direct/Indirect communication in *The Point of View*, I will analyze three pairs of interrelated categories: those of direct/indirect communication themselves, maieutic/witnessing, and reflection/simplicity. By discussing Kierkegaard's use of these concepts, I will progressively generalize the notions of direct and indirect knowledge. In this way, I will develop an understanding of direct and indirect communication which moves from these two categories' close relationship with Kierkegaard's biography to a more general understanding of what, following Kierkegaard indications, it might mean to communicate directly/indirectly. Finally, I will articulate how Kierkegaard's use of these two communicative strategies can be understood as serving an ironic purpose.

Originally, Kierkegaard's distinction between two different communicative practices was connected to his self-understanding as a religious author attempting to introduce Christianity in Christendom – that is, to make the cultural Christians of 19th-century Denmark rediscover what genuine Christianity is. In his own words, '"Direct communication" is: to communicate the truth directly; "communication in reflection" is: to *deceive into the truth* ... all the pseudonymous writings are *maieutic* in nature. Therefore [the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*] was also pseudonymous, whereas the directly religious – which from the beginning was present in the gleam of an indication – carried my name.'[381] The reason why his socio-historical situation forced him to frame his works according to two different communicative strategies is paradigmatically evident in the way Kierkegaard titles the first section of the first chapter in the second part of *The Point of View of my Work as an Author*: '"Christendom" Is an Enormous Illusion.'[382] Kierkegaard explains what he means with this title as follows:

'Everyone who in earnest and also with some clarity of vision considers what is called Christendom, or the condition in a so-called Christian country, must without any doubt

[381] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, ed. and transl. by Howard V. Hong and Edna V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988),, p. 7.
[382] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, pp. 39-41.

immediately have serious misgivings. What does it mean, after all, that all these thousands and thousands as a matter of course call themselves Christians! These many, many people, of whom by far the great majority, according to everything that can be discerned, have their lives in entirely different categories, something one can ascertain by the simplest observation! People who perhaps never once go to church, never think about God, never name his name except when they curse! People to whom it has never occurred that their lives should have some duty to God, people who either maintain that a certain civil impunity is the highest or do not find even this to be entirely necessary! Yet all these people, even those who insist that there is no God, they all are Christians, call themselves Christians, are recognized as Christians by the state, are buried as Christians by the Church, are discharged as Christians to eternity!'[383]

I think we can elucidate this passage borrowing from Lear the concept of pretense. Kierkegaard's claim is that most inhabitants of Christendom lead their lives according to non-Christian categories. Nonetheless, they think of themselves as Christians. However, the categories they live by inform their social practices in such a way that their social pretense is anything but Christian. In this respect, I believe that this passage from *The Point of View* vindicates Lear's interpretation of Christendom. In other words, Kierkegaard is indeed claiming that his contemporaries have misunderstood what sort of existential categories and social practices should constitute the Christian life. People pretend to be Christians in the wrong way, and this insofar as they lack an understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Of course, this reinforces Lear's case that Christendom's main problem does not reside in the hypocrisy or laziness of its inhabitants. In his *Wisdom won from Illness*, Lear further elaborates on this point:

'for Kierkegaard, Christendom – that is, the assemblage of social institutions and socially shared understanding of Christianity – was a "dreadful illusion." In other words, it provided an utterly distorted conception of what is involved in living a Christian life. Now what made the illusion *dreadful*, I think, was not simply its degree of falsity but its capacity of entangling one in a skein of self-deception from which there was virtually no way out. This is the Christian version of being at the bottom of Plato's Cave … from the outlook of Christendom, Christendom is Christianity: the socially accepted and taught practices are put forward as what Christianity

[383] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 41.

consists in. But what makes the illusion *dreadful*, from Kierkegaard's perspective, is Christendom enormous cognitive and emotional sophistication.'[384]

Hence, Kierkegaard introduces the categories of direct/indirect communication as a means of dealing with the question: "how can the truth be communicated to the people living in this dreadful illusion?" In other words, we can only get to understand Kierkegaard's way of using Socratic irony by first discussing the way in which he develops the problem of how to communicate the truth to the inhabitants of Christendom. In this respect, Kierkegaard thinks that this is a less straightforward problem than it could seem at first sight. In this respect, he writes that

'an illusion can never be removed directly, and basically only indirectly. If it is an illusion that all are Christians, and if something is to be done, it must be done indirectly, not by someone who loudly declares himself to be an extraordinary Christian, but by someone who, better informed, even declares himself not to be a Christian. That is, one who is under an illusion must be approached from behind. Instead of wanting to have for oneself the advantage of being the rare Christian, one must let the one ensnared have the advantage that he is a Christian, and then oneself have sufficient resignation to be the one who is far behind him – otherwise one will surely fail to extricate him from the illusion; it can be difficult enough anyway.'[385]

Moreover, he dismisses direct communication as a strategy to be profitably used against Christendom in a passage within *The Point of View*: 'if [the communicator of true Christianity] becomes impatient, then he makes a direct assault and accomplishes – nothing. By a direct attack he only strengthens a person in the illusion and also infuriates him.'[386] If we consider this passages in the light of what I called the two symptoms of the sickness of the present age, we might say that to communicate with those affected by the disease in most cases will not suffice to set them on the path of healing. Just as horrid images often fail to prevent people from buying cigarettes, it will not work to simply tell those trapped by reflection that they lead dry and deluded existences. This condition does not take away any validity from the content of direct communication, but rather calls for a different strategy to communicate this content. Then, in Kierkegaard's view one should then find a way of showing the misery of the life under Christendom, by indirectly presenting an

[384] Lear, *Wisdom won from Illness*, p. 73.
[385] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 43.
[386] Ibid., p. 43-4.

example of human excellence, perhaps by using the story of somebody living in a different way. Hopefully, this communication shall trigger an ironic effect, making the ironized wish to become and live like the portrayed examples.[387]

Hence, Kierkegaard thought that the ironic assault upon Christendom could not be operated directly – for example by confronting the hosts of false Christians with one's own self-assurance of being a proper Christian. He strengthens this point by dismissing direct communication as a strategy to be profitably used as a first approach against Christendom in another passage of *The Point of View*: 'if [the communicator of true Christianity] becomes impatient, then he makes a direct assault and accomplishes – nothing. By a direct attack he only strengthens a person in the illusion and also infuriates him.'[388] If we consider this passages in the light of what I called the two symptoms of the sickness of the present age, we might say that to communicate with those affected by the disease in most cases will not suffice to set them on the path of healing. Just as horrid images often fail to prevent people from buying cigarettes, it will not work to simply tell those trapped by reflection that they lead dry and deluded existences. This condition does not take away any validity from the content of direct communication, but rather calls for a different strategy to communicate this content. Then, in Kierkegaard's view one should then find a way of showing the misery of the life under Christendom, by indirectly presenting an example of human excellence, perhaps by using the story of somebody living in a different way. Hopefully, this communication shall trigger an ironic effect, making the ironized wish to become and live like the portrayed examples.[389] Hence, an indirect approach must be followed. This means, that in the first place to use irony against Christendom involves an insincere acceptance of the claims made by the

[387] As Golomb puts it: 'by describing the aesthetic experience poetically […] Kierkegaard forces the reader to reflect on the emptiness of this way of life and the despair it unavoidably results in. Thus Kierkegaard employs the prevailing modes of life to impel his readers to eventually adopt their antitheses: authentic faith and genuine selfhood […] Kierkegaard wishes to dispel the illusion that we are genuine Christians. He wants "to remove" the rational ethos of objectivity and reflective mode of life and lure us into the pathos of authenticity. To ready us for authenticity the illusion that we are already authentic must first be "taken away." This cannot be done directly because it will engender resistance.' Golomb, 'Kierkegaard's ironic ladder,' pp. 67-8.

[388] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 43-4.

[389] As Golomb puts it: 'by describing the aesthetic experience poetically […] Kierkegaard forces the reader to reflect on the emptiness of this way of life and the despair it unavoidably results in. Thus Kierkegaard employs the prevailing modes of life to impel his readers to eventually adopt their antitheses: authentic faith and genuine selfhood […] Kierkegaard wishes to dispel the illusion that we are genuine Christians. He wants "to remove" the rational ethos of objectivity and reflective mode of life and lure us into the pathos of authenticity. To ready us for authenticity the illusion that we are already authentic must first be "taken away." This cannot be done directly because it will engender resistance.' Golomb, 'Kierkegaard's ironic ladder,' pp. 67-8.

inhabitants of Christendom. In a second moment, the ironist shall operate in such a way so as to cause those living under the illusion to realize their conditions, and thereby the necessity of shifting their own existential categories. Crucially, this shows how irony employed against Christendom involves a connection between Socratic irony as theorized by Lear – that is, the aporetic shock that kicks in over the course of the communication's "second stage" – and irony as it has been defined by the predominant rhetorical tradition – this, insofar as in the first place Kierkegaard affirms the necessity of faking an acceptance of his opponents' claims. Furthermore, we should notice how Kierkegaard conceives the indirect practice of irony as an act of love, insofar as the ironist accepts to take upon himself a lie as well as its effects for the well-being of his neighbor.[390] In the light of the emphasis given by Kierkegaard to indirect communication, we could be tempted to think that he relegated direct communication to the rank of "second-best." However, we should restrain ourselves from concluding that direct communication has a totally negative value for Kierkegaard. If we look carefully at the passage above, we realize that all that Kierkegaard is saying is that direct communication is useless in order to initiate an ironic attack on Christendom. This is the case, because of the particular conditions dictated by the situation, that is, that people in Christendom cultivate the illusion of being Christian. Moreover, direct communication has indeed a function in communicating Christianity to Christendom – a function that can also be called ironic.

In order to understand in what way direct communication co-operate with indirect irony to the communication of Christianity, I shall now turn to discuss the paired concepts of maieutic and witness and see how they map on to the concepts of direct/indirect communication. As we have already seen, the category of the maieutic appears in the definition of indirect communication. Following the Hongs' exposition in their introduction to the *Point of View*, we can connect the category of the maieutic to that of indirect communication. In this respect, the Hongs describe the category of the maieutic with terms that recall those employed by Kierkegaard in order to discuss the nature of indirect communication. Accordingly, we find that the maieutic is that technique which is the most apt to deal ironically with Christendom. As the Hongs put it, the 'maieutic' is that which within 'an illusion […] is the maximum, and that which leaves the reader alone with the work, free from extraneous interest in the author's personality and personal life.'[391] **Thus, we can see how the maieutic connects with indirect communication, in that they both do not rely**

[390] Golomb, 'Kierkegaard's Ironic Ladder,' p. 43.
[391] Howard V. Hong, 'Historical Introduction,' in Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. xi.

on the "weight" of the communicator's personality. The attribution of maieutic properties to indirect communication should not surprise us: *maieusis* was in fact Socrates' technique of communication, through which he was able to make way for the emergence of the truth already present within his interlocutors.

Just as the Hongs underline the primacy of indirect communication and of the maieutic as tools fit to be used against Christendom, so they notice how this cannot imply the total sidelining of direct communication. With respect to the latter, they explain how this is 'the requirement of witness,' which 'is intrinsic to Christianity.'[392] As opposed to indirect communication, in direct communication the communicator is personally engaged in the message, demanding interest not only for the message he communicates, but also for his very personality, insofar as he stands as a religious witness. While in indirect communication the author conceals himself to leave the receiver "alone" with the message, in direct communication he has to appear.

There are two remarks which must be made concerning this point. First, the fact that direct communication is not sidelined by Kierkegaard's "stealth offensive" on Christendom, is testified by the presence of non-pseudonymous and openly religious writings from the very beginning of his career. Here, Kierkegaard communicates directly employing Christian categories and by making reference to Biblical texts and figures. However, I hold that these writings also have an ironic purpose, which nonetheless must be differentiated from that of the indirect and maieutic authorship. While the latter aims to provoke a rebirth in the inhabitants of Christendom by "stabbing them in the back," the direct communications – specifically I am thinking about the *Upbuilding Discourses* – are aimed at the "converted," as testified by Kierkegaard's claim that these texts are aimed at what he calls the "single individual."

Later I shall say some words about this figure, but for now it suffices to say that Kierkegaard understands the 'movement' of his production as going from the 'crowd' or the 'public' to the 'single individual' – that is, the one who has been maieutically taken out of the crowd.[393]

[392] Hong., *Historical Introduction*, pp. XI-XII.

[393] It should be noted that – although to my awareness there is no explicit statement by Kierkegaard with respect to this matter – I consider the expressions 'crowd' and 'public' to be equivalent. I hope this assumption will be justified by what follows.

The religious writings, aimed at the single individual who has already known left behind "Christendom Christianity" and who is seeking to cultivate his pretense according to categories and social practices which are genuinely Christian, are texts meant to shake the single individual off of any stale understanding of the Gospel, and to provide fresh but also critical insight into topics like prayer, the sacraments, etc.. This still counts as irony, insofar as it shakes the pretense of the one striving to be a Christian. However, this happens within a framework of categories established with the help of the maieutic and by indirect communication, which has helped the member of the crowd to make the transition to being a single individual. **In this sense, we could reach back to my discussion of Lear's account of irony in Chapter 1, and specifically to his claim that some instances of self-reflection can function as forms of restricted irony. In this respect, I believe that what Kierkegaard is attempitng to do with his religious communications is something similar to what happens to the Christian of Lear's example in his interactions with the beggar outside the church. In other words, Kierkegaard aims to shake his audience without trying to let them out of their pretense. Rather, he aims to make them grow in their current existential categories. In this sense, while religious witnessing would be completely lost on the inhabitants of Christendom – insofar as they would not respond to it – this does not eliminate completely the usefulness of witnessing.[394] Rather, we should read Kierkegaard's direct communications as way of sharing his wisdom concerning the Christian life, in such a way that he hopes it shall be helpful to people who have become single individuals by leaving behind Christendom. These "communications of wisdom" can indeed have disorienting effects on the receiver, but never so much as to push them outside their current pretense: this follows, insofar as – in my reading – Kierkegaard believed that the latter was the duty of the maieutic and indirect communications, and that the religious**

[394] In this regard, Christopher Hamilton writes that 'the collapse of the Christian metaphysical tradition has left the vocabulary of that tradition without any conceptual bite: it rings hollow to the ears of those who hear it. It is this which necessitates Kierkegaard method of "indirect communication," that is, holding up the mirror to his contemporaries that they might see what they were and be shocked is seeking a refuge in (an authentic) Christianity. It is only as a poet Kierkegaard believes, that he can speak of Christianity since any direct, non-poetical, communication would, or at least might, drive his reader-hearers, in a feeling of resentment, further into the abyss of what Kierkegaard conceives of as their nihilism.' I definitely agree with the first part of this statement, but with respect to what I wrote above, I have to partially distance myself from the second part: it is not that direct communication cannot be used to communicate Christianity, at least insofar as this communication is religious witness. It is rather the fact that direct communication to be efficient must be made secondary to indirect communication. Christopher Hamilton, 'Kierkegaard on Truth as Subjectivity: Christianity, Ethics and Asceticism,' in *Religious Studies*, 1 (1998), p. 68.

writings be properly understood only by someone who had already left behind the old paradigm represented by Christendom.

Kierkegaard's practice of maieutic and indirect communication is connected to his use of pseudonyms. According to a dynamic which I shall discuss more closely in the next section, pseudonyms allow Kierkegaard to set up what Carl S. Hughes calls a "staging." In order to elaborate this concept, Hughes takes as a starting point a claim made by Johannes Climacus in the *Philosophical Fragments* concerning the tale of a king in love with a lowly maiden, which acts as a metaphor of the Incarnation. Climacus says that 'the purpose of this story is not to communicate knowledge but to affect readers viscerally, "to awaken."'[395] Building on this theatrical metaphor, we can say that the king and the maiden work as actors on the stage constituted by Johannes Climacus' narrative. The pseudonym itself is a sort of third actor – another fictional character invented by Kierkegaard – breaking the fourth wall by addressing the reader and telling his story. In this respect, Climacus nurtures no illusion concerning the possibility that his storytelling skills may be good enough to adequately describe the divine love expressed by the Incarnation. Such love is simply beyond the human capacity for representation, and Climacus' story succeeds where it fails, breaking down and pointing to the fullness of its object lying beyond itself. In other words, the staging succeeds when it causes an ironic effect in the spectator, showing how he has to redress his own social practices, realizing that God and the ideal of Christian living exceed his current pretense, and that he has to rework his own social practice in order to embrace them more fully. In Hughes' words 'Kierkegaard's stories, images, and personae are stagings which do not aim to fully express what they convey but to awaken to a yearning for the fullness of what they stand for.'[396] Subsequently the portion of Kierkegaard's authorship which consists in indirect communications has a theatrical nature insofar as it includes a number of maieutic stagings, on as many constructed stages, all of which aim to prompt their spectators 'to become actors on the stage of the eternal by entering into passionate relationship with God.'[397] At the same time, as underlined by Hughes, direct communication also has a "staged dimension," which, for instance, we can find when Kierkegaard relies on Biblical figures to discuss what one's attitude as a Christian should be. **Once**

[395] Carl S. Hughes, *Kierkegaard and the Staging of Desire: Rhetoric and Performance in a Theology of Eros* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 5.
[396] Ibid., p. 5.
[397] Ibid., p. 11.

again, the two kinds of staging correspond to the different uses of irony I have previously discussed: where one aims to "carve" the single individual out of the public, the latter aims to upbuild him, while remaining within the same pretense. In other words, we could say that indirect communication tries to take set the receiver on the same path walked by the figures presented in the Bible. In turn, since direct communication is aimed at those who are already walking this path, it aims at pushing and encouraging them to make further advances down the road.

It must be noticed that – in spite of the fact that his religious texts involve his presence as an author – Kierkegaard's direct communications do not clash with Kierkegaard's claims that he is not an 'extraordinary Christian,' even though they require the presence of the communicator's personality. This follows, insofar as in the religious writings the focus is placed not so much on Kierkegaard's character as such, but rather on his character as a disciple of Jesus Christ. In other words, we can presume that in this texts Kierkegaard was attempting to communicate certain elements of the religious life that he had experienced at first hand; however, he can avoid putting himself forward as an extraordinary Christian, insofar as he his always putting the emphasis not so much on his experience, but rather on the message which is to be embodied – or, which is essentially the same, on the way in which this message was embodied by certain biblical figures. Kierkegaard's elaborates this point in a journal entry from 1849, where he claims that '**witnessing** is still the form of communication that strikes the truest mean between direct and indirect communication. Witnessing is direct communication, but nevertheless it does not make one's contemporaries the *authority*. While the witness' *communication* addresses itself to the contemporaries, the *witness* himself addresses God and makes him the authority.'[398] Religious witnessing is direct communication insofar as the communicator's personality is involved and plays a crucial role in delivering the communication. At the same time, it maintains some features of indirect communication insofar as the witness is just a vessel for the true source of his message – that is, God.[399] Crucially, this means that even the works that Kierkegaard explicitly points out as representing instances of direct communication cannot be considered as thoroughly direct. I shall elaborate this point further in the next section. For now, it suffices to say that I believe that a

[398] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 187.
[399] Ibid., p. 187.

connection between these two forms of communication strengthen the case for finding Kierkegaard's practice of irony also in his religious writings.

Alongside the conceptual couples of direct/indirect communication, and maieutic/witnessing, I shall now introduce a third conceptual pair: reflection/simplicity. This third pair of concepts is also used by Kierkegaard in close connection with the other two, and I shall use it in order to further clarify his communicative strategies and how these lay the groundwork for his practice of irony. The categories of reflection and simplicity are introduced right at the beginning of *The Point of View*, where Kierkegaard claims he as an author has wished to communicate but one thing through all of his production: the 'religious.' However, Kierkegaard specifies that he sought 'the religious completely cast into reflection, yet in such a way that it is completely taken back out of reflection into simplicity.' This, he adds,

'is also … the Christian *movement*. Christianly, one does not proceed from the simple in order then to become interesting, witty, profound, a poet, a philosopher, etc. No it is just the opposite; *here* one begins and then becomes more and more simple, arrives at the simple. This, in "Christendom," is *Christianly* the movement of reflection; one does not reflect oneself into Christianity but reflects oneself out of something else and becomes more and more simple, a Christian.'[400]

According to Kierkegaard, in Christendom one should be moved out of the habit of constant reflection, and strive to "become simple" – that is, to become one – with the ideal of Christian living. Crucially though, reaching simplicity does not abolish the use or need for reflection: to become one with the Christian form-of-life is not to return to a condition of childish innocence, where one simply lives one's own form of life without need of any afterthought or intellectual consideration. On the contrary, reflection is redeemed by being subsumed into the Christian life. This is something we can gather from the following journal entry dated 1848:

[400] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, pp. 6-7. On a similar note, Kierkegaard's later adds 'one does not become a Christian through reflection, but in reflection to become a Christian through reflection, but in reflection to become a Christian means that there is something else to discard. A person does not reflect himself into being a Christian but out of something else in order to become a Christian, especially when the situation is Christendom, where one must reflect oneself out of the appearance of being a Christian. The nature of the something else determines how deep, how significant the movement of reflection is. The reflection-qualification is specifically this: that one comes from a distance, and from what distance one comes to become a Christian. The reflection-qualification is the difficulty, which is greater in proportion to the value and significance of what is left behind. Ibid., p. 93.

'it has generally been thought that reflection is the natural enemy of Christianity and would destroy it. With God's help I hope to show that God-fearing reflection can retie knots that a shallow, superficial reflection has diddled with so long. The divine authority of the Bible and everything related to it has been abolished; it looks as if one final unit of reflection is on the way to do a counter service, to reset the coil springs in the essentially Christian so that it can stand its ground – against reflection. Of course, Christianity remains the same, altered in no way; not an iota is changed. But the battle becomes a different one; up until now it has been between reflection and the immediate, simple Christianity – now it becomes a battle between reflection and simplicity armed with reflection. There is sense in this, I believe. The task is not to comprehend Christianity but to comprehend that one cannot comprehend it. This is the holy cause of faith, and reflection is therefore sanctified by being used in this way. Oh, the more I think of what has been granted to me, the more I need an eternity in which to thank God.'[401]

Transfigured – or sanctified – by its goal, reflection for the sake of simplicity is introduced into the "circuit" of Christendom's reflection for the sake of reflection, with the aim of "fishing" people out of the latter. Just as the unconscious sea-creature bites the next meal and is thus baited out of the water, so the one living in Christendom will approach, say, *Either/Or* as just another literary-philosophical curiosity thus finding the way out of unsanctified reflection. It must be then noticed how reflection includes the practice of irony: Kierkegaard's works have irony at their core: they are devices that trigger the movement from reflection to aporia, which in this sense becomes the situation where one can make a choice in favor of simplicity, insofar as the aporetic shock disrupts the normal reflection mechanism – that which I have called emptiness in Chapter 1. Moreover, irony appears as an element of reflection both during the process through which one is baited out of Christendom, and later when reflection is fully and organically part of Christianity. To see this, we just have to map on the above-mentioned distinction between a use of irony which causes one to break free from Christendom, and one which, albeit "restricted," is able to upbuild those who have made the transition to single individuals.[402] **This theme is also echoed in the**

[401] Kierkegaard, 'Entries from Journals and Papers: On My Work/Point of View,' in *The Point of View*, p. 167.

[402] The use of the plural here might seem objectionable. As we have mentioned before, Kierkegaard indeed had in mind one single individual - that is, Regine Olsen - when he identified such a figure as his ideal reader. As much as this expression later became a broader philosophical category, there is no trace of Kierkegaard use of it in the plural form. Nonetheless, I believe that this move on my part is not unwarranted. In this sense, just like a "true" Christian stands to a "Christendom Christian" as the single individual stands to a member of the crowd, so a church made of

closing section of *Stages on Life's Way*, which is entitled "Letter to the Reader" and signed by the hand of the pseudonym Father Taciturnus. There, Taciturnus reflects on the notion of seduction as a form of liberation – Daniel Berthold calls it 'de-seduction' – from the powers shaping the reader.[403] This form of seduction aims to induce the belief 'that the single individual has infinite significance and this is the validity of life.'[404] This is indeed the 'reduplication' through which Kierkegaard aims to free the reader from Christendom and to help him to become himself by standing as a single individual.[405] Accordingly, it is evident that Kierkegaard's own seductive and ironic practice is grounded in 'an ethics of deception aimed at affirming the other's … autonomy.'[406]

The conceptual pair of reflection and simplicity helps us in many ways. First of all, it allows us to further deepen our analysis of religious witnessing. As we already know, religious witnessing is a form of direct communication mixed with elements of indirect communication in that it points beyond itself and towards God as the true originator of its content. Accordingly, we have a genuine act of religious witnessing only when the witness has achieved in some degree the ideal of Christian living – that is, he has achieved some degree of simplicity. To put it differently, a Christian is able to communicate the Gospel directly and in simplicity to the extent in which he himself embodies the Gospel: this happens insofar as he is communicating himself, to the extent in which he is the same as the message that he is communicating. I believe that my interpretation is supported by the fact that when Kierkegaard undertook a thorough presentation of Christian living – *Practice in Christianity* – he did not take responsibility for the authorship of this work. Rather, he "entrusted" the work to a pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, who in the introduction to this work is said to be a perfect Christian.[407] As much as the choice of publishing this book pseudonymously was also influenced by biographical considerations – Kierkegaard was

single individuals – the true church – stands to the established church of Christendom. In this sense we could also relate the single individual's separateness from the crowd to the sainthood – let us think of the original meaning of the term "saint" as that one who is "set apart" - of the members of the church, affirmed by the Augsburg confession. On this see also note 392.

[403] Daniel Berthold, 'Kierkegaard's Seductions: The Ethics of Authorship,' in *MLN*¸120 (2005), p. 1054.

[404] Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, p. 491.

[405] Berthold, p. 1055.

[406] Ibid., p. 1057.

[407] 'Anti-Climacus […] is meant to be an "extraordinary high" or advanced Christian author who Kierkegaard distinguishes from himself not to indicate disagreement with him but from humility.' Davenport, 'Selfhood and "Spirit,"' p. 232.

considering seeking a position in the Danish church, and he feared that publishing *Practice in Christianity* under his own name would damage his chances of obtaining that job – I think that his choice was also a result of Kierkegaard's own ideas – moreover, we should also take into consideration that Anti-Climacus was already available to Kierkegaard from the previous publication of *The Sickness Unto Death*. On the ground of these, one could argue that, if the degree in which someone can communicate the gospel as an articulation of its actual life-experience is dictated by its simplicity with the Christian ideal, it follows that the only perfect witness of the Christian ideal must be Jesus Christ himself. This follows precisely insofar as, according to Christian dogma, he represents the ideal of Christian living itself and therefore he must necessarily be in perfect simplicity with it. This would mean that strictly speaking only a second Christ – if there was such a thing – could communicate with full simplicity the ideal of Christian living. Given that Kierkegaard was very far from claiming this condition for himself, he necessarily had to delegate his views concerning the perfect form of Christian living to the voice of a pseudonym who was an "extraordinary Christian." By placing himself out of the way, he tried to help his readers to re-discover how to live up to the ideal of the Christian life by creating an imaginary figure whose words they could use – in reflection – to come to embrace the ideal of the Christian life – in simplicity and out of reflection.

I think that this interpretation is supported by a journal-entry left by Kierkegaard in 1849, where he writes that

'the fact that there is a pseudonym is the *qualitative* expression that it is a poet-communication, that is not I who speaks but another, that it is addressed to me just as much as to others; it is as if a spirit speaks, while I get the incovenience of being the editor … with respect to ethical-religious communication … I am not permitted to communicate more than what I, the speaker am, that is, in my own factual first person, no more than what my life existentially but fairly well conforms to. If I place the requirement higher, I must express that this presentation is a poetic one. It is altogether appropriate for me to present it, since it may influence another to strive more, and I myself must define myself as one who is striving in relation to it, thereby distinguishing

myself from the typical poet, to whom it never occurs to strive personally in relation to the ideality he presents.'[408]

Apart from substantiating my views concerning Kierkegaard's creation of Anti-Climacusa, this journal-entry allows me to make a further point. That is, that in Anti-Climacus we have the full intertwining of the maieutic and of what Kierkegaard arguably understands as a representation of the highest simplicity with the ideal of Christian living that may be available to human beings – that is, with the exception of Christ himself – where the latter, being presented by a pseudonym, is cast in reflection and therefore into potentiality and as a form of life that the receivers of Kierkegaard's communications can strive for. In this way Anti-Climacus stands within the realm of potentiality, while at the same time pointing outside reflection and into the realms of life, actuality, action, and simplicity.

As a conclusion to this section, I would like to synthetize my findings as follows: the two series of Kierkegaard's works up to *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* intertwine the practice of indirect and direct communication, mixing the techniques of maieutic-reflective writing and that of religious witnessing aimed at fostering simplicity. All of this condensates on the one hand in the pseudonymous writings, and on the other hand in the religious communications – specifically, in the *Upbuilding Discourses*. Both of these series of writings represent ways in which Kierkegaard attempted to communicate the truth ironically to his contemporaries. The pseudonymous writings bear the potential to cause what Lear sees as "proper" irony, insofar as they aim to make the inhabitants of Christendom insecure concerning whether or not they are living up to the ideal of Christian life. In turn, the religious communications represent instances of what Lear considers to be instances of the normal patterns of self-reflection expressed by a particular social pretense. In this case, the social pretense is that of "true Christian life" – that is, Christian life as it is expressed once somebody sees Christendom for what it is, and thereby seeks to start living according to categories which are truly Christian. In this sense, the religious communications aim to "upbuild" their receivers: this communication still holds a limited ironic potential, insofar as they can cause somebody to be shaken in his pretense and consequently to become able to grow in its achievement of the ideal. Nonetheless, the religious works cannot express proper irony insofar as they do not

[408] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 227. In the same year, he writes 'a pseudonym is excellent for accentuating a point a stance, a position. It creates a poetical person.' Ibid., p. 301.

seek to "kick" somebody outside of his pretense – and, according to Kierkegaard, can only fail to do so when aimed at somebody still living according to Christendom's presentation of Christianity. **Hence, these two forms of irony are brought to work together: the pseudonymous writings are meant to lure somebody outside of Christendom, whereas the religious works find their place within the proper Christian life lived by Christendom's escapees. Once again, we can see this in the light of Kierkegaard's reconstruction of his authorship in *The Point of View*, as he puts in parallel his aesthetic and religious works. What we obtain by looking at Kierkegaard's authorship through this perspective is the image of the pseudonymous ironist luring the prisoners of Christendom into freedom, becoming the audience of the religious ironist.[409]**

Having argued for the existence of two forms of irony within Kierkegaard's authorship, I shall proceed to substantiate my claim by discussing some of their actual occurences. Firstly, I shall discuss Kierkegaard's practice of irony as a pseudonymous author. In order to do so, I will explore the ironic practices enacted by Kierkegaard using the personae of Victor Eremita, A, and Judge William. Secondly, I shall discuss Kierkegaard's use of irony in and through the *Upbuilding Discourses*.

1.3 On Kierkegaard's practice of irony, with respect to his different author-positions

A) On Kierkegaard's practice of irony, with particular respect to Victor Eremita and the pseudonymous authorship as a generic position

Published in 1843 and written during Kierkegaard's visit to Berlin in the aftermath of his split with Regine Olsen,[410] *Either/or* starts with a well-known literary fiction. In the preface, an individual known as Victor Eremita – who is also the pseudonymous editor of the book – narrates how he chanced upon a manuscript, contained within a secret compartment hidden inside an old piece of furniture. The manuscript comes in two sets of writings, each belonging to a different author, which Victor decides to call respectively A

[409] The Hongs seem to be making a similar point in their introduction to *Either/Or*: 'the dialectical complexity of the pseudonymous series of writing and the duplexity of the two differentiated parallel series were Kierkegaard's way of combining Socratic maieutic indirection in the one series and the direct approach in the other' Hong, Hong, 'Historical Introduction,' p. 20.

[410] Berthold, 'Kierkegaard's Seductions,' p. 1044.

and B – this, in spite of the fact that we know from the papers themselves that the name of the second author is William.[411]

Hence, Victor appears as an intra-textual authorial voice, as well as a creative editor who gives an identity to the other pseudonyms, organizing their writings into one literary body.[412] In this respect, Victor does not limit himself to impose a name on William and his unknown correspondent: he also categorizes A's writings as discussing the nature of aesthetic existence and those of William as presenting that of the ethical one.[413] Victor also offers some considerations concerning both groups of writings. First, he writes that 'A's papers contain a multiplicity of approaches to an esthetic view of life,' immediately adding that this is consistent with the nature of the aesthetic life, insofar as 'a coherent esthetic view of life can hardly be presented.'[414] Second, he points out the fact that while B's studies follow an evident logic – insofar as they quote and presuppose A's works – the aesthetic essays do not show evidence of any coherent order. The first essay in particular, entitled by Victor "Diapsalmata," is a collection of aphorisms whose ordering Victor admits to have left to chance.[415] In spite of this, Victor underlines how all of A's material was ready for print as he found it.

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[411] While *Either/Or* is concluded by a short sermon composed by an acquaintance of B, I shall not focus here on this text, insofar as I deem it to be located within the religious existence sphere. Since I focus on the latter below, I thought it was not necessary to deal twice with the same topic, something that would have unavoidably produced a number of repetitions.

[412] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or – Part 1*, pp. 37 *passim*.

[413] Ibid., pp. 38-39. Actually, the last section of *Either/Or* is constituted by a short sermon which is not authored by B but by a friend of him who pastors a Lutheran community in the Danish countryside. While B gestures to this text as reinforcing his description and arguments in favor of the ethical life, at a close inspection it is clear that the pastor's considerations pertain more properly to the religious sphere. In this respect, in their introduction to *Stages on Life's Way* the Hongs write that 'The relation of Stages to the earlier pseudonymous works, is one of continuity and contrast … Either/Or presents two qualitatively distinguished stages of life, the immediate or esthetic (that by which one is what one becomes), and an intimation of the third stage, the religious, in the concluding.' Victor Hong, Edna Hong, "Historical Introduction," in Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 13. In any case, Victor Eremita seems to subsume unproblematically this text with the rest of the ethical writings contained in *Either/Or*. This is not the place for any in-depth discussion of the internal structure of *Either/Or*, and I shall focus exclusively on the expositions of the aesthetic and of the ethical life contained therein, insofar as I think that Kierkegaard's discussion of the religious life can be seen with more perspicuity in his writings devoted exclusively to this topic. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the sermon – notwithstanding its shortness – represents a useful introduction to the author's latger religious writings – in particular, in the light of the fact that it puts such an heavy stress on the importance of acknowledging one's own creatureliness in front of God.

[414] Ibid. p. 47.

[415] Ibid., pp. 39-40.

My claim, is that Victor Eremita is the persona that best exemplifies the meaning of the pseudonymous authorship as a generic position. In other words, while Victor clearly has his own fictional biography and specific characteristics, I think that he is the pseudonym that best represents the generic features of the ironic mechanism underlying Kierkegaard's indirect communications. In particular, my reason for proposing such a view, is my belief that in Kierkegaard's use of Victor we can see a prime example of his strategy of self-removal – a strategy which is conducive to his practice of irony. Of course, this move is reiterated by Kierkegaard through his other numerous pseudonyms. However, Victor stands out for his editorial self-consciousness. As opposed to the other pseudonyms, Victor is working with no content which is 100% of his own making: rather, he is "just" editing and rearranging the written efforts of the other pseudonyms – in this sense, Victor re-duplicates Kierkegaard's authorial and yet removed relationship to his pseudonymous works. In this way, by pretending that the book has been edited by another author, Kierkegaard avoids occupying the role of the teacher directly transmitting the truth to the reader.[416] This leaves the readers in dialogue with the imaginary authors – that is, with nobody "real."[417] As Daniel Berthold put it, Victor steps back from actively taking a position between A and B, because 'what is being spoken of [by Victor] cannot truly be *spoken* of [directly]' – and this is true for the reasons which I have discussed in the previous sections.[418] In this sense, through Victor Kierkegaard tries to help his readers to meditate on whether or not they have achieved a distinctively human life by providing the readers with a chance to take into consideration an array of different forms of existence.[419] As mentioned above, this dynamic of presenting and retreating is the essence of indirect communication and of the maieutic presentation of truth. Therefore, we can say that *Either/Or* is a fundamentally maieutic text, which I hold provides the blueprint for all the other pseudonymous works.

I think that Kierkegaard's goals for *Either/Or* are clearly manifested by the way in which Victor decides to arrange the materials composing *Either/Or*, and by his comments

[416] Berthold, 'Kierkegaard's Seductions,' p. 1045.
[417] Ibid., p. 1046.
[418] Ibid., p. 1047.
[419] The same concern shall later be explicitly voiced by Kierkegaard through the figure of Anti-Climacus. See Marcia C. Robinson, 'Kierkegaard's Existential Play: Storytelling and the Development of the Religious Imagination in the Authorship,' in *Kierkegaard, Literature, and the Arts*, ed. by Eric Ziolkowski (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018), pp. 72-3.

concerning the same writings. The B-texts are letters sent to A which essentially discuss the contrast between the ethical and the aesthetic life, with B arguing for the superiority of the former over the latter. However, Victor warns us that the papers contain no indications of the outcome of the quarrel. In the light of this fact, he came up with the title *Either/Or*. He writes that this title should 'release [the reader] from every final question – whether A actually was persuaded and repented, whether B was victorious, or whether perhaps B finally came around to A's thinking.'[420] In other words, Victor fails to find any resolution to the quarrel between the aesthetic and the ethical life. Moreover, he has no wish to pick a side in the discussion, perhaps deciding the outcome of the duel. It should also be noticed that Victor seems to hint that A and B could actually be the same person – the distinction between the two being just an editorial illusion of his own making.[421] Of course, the truth of Victor's statements is in itself irrelevant, insofar as they are narrative moves setting the scene for Kierkegaard's indirect staging of the truth. In this sense, we can see how both Kierkegaard and Victor – that is, the real and the pseudonymous author – take a sidestep from occupying the center of the stage, leaving the reader to reflect on the different existence-forms.

If I am correct to say that in some way Victor represents Kierkegaard's "generic position as a pseudonymous author," I think that it is possible to claim that Victor Eremita is the name of an "ironic trap:" through the pseudonym's work, Kierkegaard hopes that the reader shall indirectly come to see themselves against the existential patterns set forth in *Either/Or*, thereby realizing how living in aesthetic and ethical categories means falling short of living a fully realized human life – and definitely means not living a Christian. This trap runs along the lines of the general "mechanism" of reflection, as I have discussed it in the previous sections. Accordingly, by reflecting about the existence-forms discussed in *Either/Or*, the readers should eventually curve their "reflective flow" onto themselves. In other words, they should start comparing the pseudonyms existence to their own. Hopefully, this should make them feel dissatisfied with living purely aesthetic and ethical lives. Finally, they should come to experience the attractiveness of faith and embrace a truly Christian existence – of course, assuming that we trust Kierkegaard's words in *The Point of View*, thereby believing that from the very beginning the pseudonymous authorship was religiously

[420] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or – Part 1*, p. 47.
[421] Berthold, 'Kierkegaard's Seductions,' p. 1047.

motivated.[422] The religious sphere of existence is only hinted at in the closing section of *Either/Or* – a sermon composed by a pastor who is an acquaintance of B – but is only thoroughly unfolded in later writings.

Hence, the strategy enacted by Kierkegaard through Victor helps to set the conditions for first ensnaring the readers into the text, causing them to reflect on their existence. Eventually, this should cause an ironic break in their pretenses and propel them into real-life action, as soon as they begin to realize that their current social practices as aesthetic or ethical individualities are not conducive to achieving a distinctively human life.[423] In this respect, Victor first presents himself as being "just" a compiler, thereby blocking the temptation to rely upon him as an authority capable of solving the quarrel between A and B – something that would take away the reader the responsibility of taking care of himself. The result is that, as Stephen Crites put it, 'the pseudonymous writings are designed to throw every reader back on his own resources … they assign him to himself.'[424] Appropriately, it has been said that through his writings Kierkegaard often seeks to 'hold up a mirror to the reader's true self.'[425] And once again, we must recall that what is crucial to the effect of making irony happen is one's own reflection in the mirror, rather than the person who holds the mirror. In other words, the pseudonyms, the characters, and generally speaking the quasi-literary tone of Kierkegaard's "aesthetic writings"[426] expose his readers to different possibilities through which one can put oneself forward in the world, while at the same time discussing their validity in the light of what he takes to be the actual substance of the human condition. In this way, he hopes to lead his readers into desiring the religious life as that which really leads to achieve what they essentially are.[427]

Of course, as we experience our failure to express an ideal life through our own resources, this event of being-thrown-back-upon-oneself is precisely the prelude to *aporia*.

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[422] Ibid., p. 72.
[423] Joakim Garff, 'Kierkegaard's Christian Bildungsroman,' in *Kierkegaard, Literature and the Arts*, p. 87.
[424] Stephen Cries, "Pseudonymous Authorship as Art and as Act," in *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Josiah Thompson (New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 223.
[425] Carlisle, *Kierkegaard*, p. 31.
[426] Ibid., p. 31.
[427] The same concept is explicitly expressed by the pseudonyms Vigilius Haufniensis and Anti-Climacus. The firs write in *The Concept of Anxiety* that his task is help his readers become 'the true and the whole man,' while the second claims in the *Sickness unto Death* that 'the self must be broken in order to become itself.' See Ibid., p. 90.

Accordingly, I believe that Victor's gesture of showing the nature of the aesthetic and of the ethical life is the same as that of Socrates asking his fellow citizens "what do you think is the nature of [e.g.] courage?" In other words, what Victor is actually telling his readers is "do you think that either the aesthetic or the ethical life represents true human life?" And, as a second-order question, he adds "regardless of your answer to question one, where are you in life now? What kind of life are you leading and how do you measure up to your ideals of human existence?" As I shall discuss below, I think that this basic gesture is repeated by all the pseudonyms, in accordance with their different features. However, thanks to his editorial reflections, Victor helps us see his own intention with greater clarity – in this sense, he is perhaps the best example of Johannes Climacus' *dictum* that 'The fact that there is no author is a vehicle for distancing.'[428]

B) Irony and aesthetic existence

In this sub-section, I shall turn to the first volume of *Either/Or*, discussing how Kierkegaard ironizes the aesthetic life. As already mentioned, the first part of *Either/Or* contains a number of representations of the aesthetic way of life.[429] Each of these show a different instantiation of the aesthetic existence. For example, the Hongs argue that the sections entitled *Diapsalmata* and *Rotation of the Crops* represent the life of the 'despairing aestheticist,'[430] whereas they claim that the *Seducer's Diary* is a representation of romantic

[428] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 211. This with the possible exception of the mysterious publisher of the text authored by Judge William contained in *Stages on Life's Way*. The former says of himself that 'I am pure being and thus almost less than nothing. I am the pure being that is everywhere present but yet not noticeable, for I am continually being annulled. I am like the line with the arithmetic problem above and the answer below – who cares about the line? By myself, I am capable of nothing at all, for even the idea of tricking Victor out of the manuscript was not my own notion, but the very notion according to which I borrowed the manuscript, as thieves put it, was in fact borrowed from Victor. Now, in publishing the manuscript, I again am nothing at all, for the manuscript belongs to the Judge, and in my nothingness I as publisher am only like a nemesis upon Victor, who presumably thought he had the right to publish it.' Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, p. 134.

[429] For example, André Clair writes that 'La première partie d'*Ou bien – ou bien* est le texte majeur de l'esthétique. C'est un ouvrage compose bizarrement, constitute de huit textes hétéroclites habiliment disposes au hazard, baroque en somme. André Clair, 'L'Esthétique Existentielle de Kierkegaard: le Génie, le Virtuose et l'Immédiat,' in *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*, 145 (2013), p. 220.

[430] Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 'Historical Introduction,' in Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or – Part 1*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: New Jersey University Press, 1987), p. 15. The same perspective is shared by Martínez and Castellanos who identify 'a deep desperation' as the feeling underlying the whole of the *Diapsalmata*. Luis Guerrero Martínez, Jesús René Flores Castellanos, '*Diapsalmata*: la existencia como vacío en un seudónimo de Kierkegaard,' in *Devenires*, 35 (2017), pp. 103-136.

individualism, an example of what Friedrich Schlegel calls 'life as a work of art.'[431] Of course, this is not the place for an extensive analysis of the different aesthetic voices contained in *Either/Or*. Instead, I shall draw selectively from A's essays in order to show the way in which irony is at work in them.

I shall start commenting on some features of the *Seducer's Diary*. According to Jane Duran, the "Seducer's Diary" represents one of Kierkegaard's earliest developments of the category of reflectivity. She grounds her claim on Kierkegaard's contrast between two sorts of seducers. On the one hand, we have the non-reflective seducer represented by Don Juan – at this stage, the aesthete has no self-consciousness and no thought, thereby living in pure immediacy. As A put it, insofar as Don Juan is pure sensuality, he 'continually hovers between being idea – that is, power, life – and being an individual.' [432] Accordingly, he is enough of an individual in order to have a separate bodily and psychological existence, but he is not enough of an individual to have the reflexivity necessary to give his life an overall intentional coherence. Once again, we can make reference to A's words: 'Don Juan is a picture that is continually coming into view but does not attain form and consistency.'[433] In this sense Don Juan lives without reflectivity insofar as he lives without reflecting on what he does and why he does it. In a way, he is not even a seducer *qua* seducer, insofar as he does not choose to be one: he simply lives by his desire.[434]

In contrast with Don Juan, we have Johannes, the reflective seducer; he is 'the deceiver *par excellence*.' While he still lives in the aesthetic plane, Johannes' reflectivity contains the potential for producing his break onto another level.[435] As a matter of facts, what intrigues Johannes is neither the seduction of his lover – a certain Cordelia – nor the satisfaction of his sexual desire. In turn, Johannes is fascinated by the possibility of shaping Cordelia into the object of his desires – that is, he is fascinated by the possibility of exercising his powers on someone else. At the same time, in order to make Cordelia's true character vanish, Johannes has to let his own personality go: shaping Cordelia in an idealized object

[431] Hong, Hong, 'Historical Introduction,' in Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, I, p. 15.
[432] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, p. 143.
[433] Ibid., p. 143.
[434] Duran, 'Kierkegaard's Christian Reflectivity,' pp. 133-4.
[435] Ibid., p. 134.

of desire first requires that she falls in love with Johannes. This can happen only at the cost of Johannes' cancelling out one of his true traits.[436] Therefore, Johannes' possessive reshaping of Cordelia comes at the cost of being unable to express himself as he really is.

Johannes himself seems unable to see the price of his reflectivity. Discussing his techniques of seduction, he writes that

'he who does not know how to encircle a girl so that she loses sight of everything he does not want her to see, he who does not know how to poetize himself into a girl so that it is from her that everything proceeds as he wants it – he is and remains a bungler. I shall not envy him his enjoyment. Such a person is and remains a bungler, a seducer, which I can by no means be called. I am an esthete, an eroticist, who has grasped the nature and the point of love, who believes in love and knows it from the ground up, and I reserve for myself only the private opinion that no love affair should last more than anything else in the world. To poetize oneself into a girl is an art; to poetize oneself out of her is a masterstroke. But the latter depends essentially on the former.'[437]

In other words, Johannes sees himself in total control of the situation. However, from these lines we see the true danger to which Johannes is exposed. By poetizing himself into Cordelia, he makes himself a work of imagination, thereby flattening his personality on the requirements needed in order to seduce her. In order for his "artistry" to work, Johannes has to sacrifice himself to Cordelia; however, this sacrifice does not come with the reward of a new identity, such as for example that of the married man – who "sacrifices" his own individual freedom for the sake of creating a new life and identity together with his spouse. Rather, Johannes sacrifices himself for the sake of a deception: he blinds Cordelia to certain aspects of his personality he does not wish her to see; he sacrifice himself unto her by covering his identity up; he makes her believe that he is truly devoted to her; and finally he draws out of the relationship – that is, he performs his 'masterstroke.' Through this last step Johannes finally retreats into himself, but once again we should notice that he depicts this retreat as an act of poetry.

[436] Berthold, 'Kierkegaard's Seductions,' p. 1051.
[437] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, I, p. 477.

As we shall discuss in the next section, Kierkegaard employs the word "poetry" in a variety of ways, some positive, some negative. In this case it is clearly the case that he is presenting Johannes as a kind of Romantic poet. For now, it suffices to say that in this case what Kierkegaard has in mind is a practice of poetry which essentially consists in turning the concrete into the abstract. In particular, the Romantic poet poetizes himself in the above-mentioned sense that he turns his actual subjectivity into an imagined one. Johannes himself seems to be utterly conscious of this condition when, towards the end of his diary writes 'everything is a metaphor; I myself am a myth about myself, for is it not as a myth that I hasten to this tryst? Who I am is irrelevant; everything finite and temporal is forgotten; only the eternal remains, the power of erotic love, its longing, its bliss … how vigorous, sound, and happy is my soul, as present as a god.'[438] Of course, the truth that transpires from these lines is that Johannes is no god and that he has sacrificed his identity and Cordelia's love for him for the sake of something imaginary. He has built himself into a myth thereby losing the chance of truly living his life. Accordingly, when we read Johannes writing of poetizing himself into and outside of his relationship with Cordelia, this means that both movements end in Johannes developing an imaginary relationship to himself. Even when he breaks his relationship with Cordelia, he is more concerned with performing a part within a narrative poem, rather than being actually touched by and involved with the actual events of his life.

Therefore, in spite of all of his reflectivity, Johannes is unable to express a full individuality insofar as he cannot cultivate his own personality, but has to repress and hide the latter in order to seduce his victim. By doing so, by rejecting the sort of stable commitment that comes with an engaging and long-term relationship, Johannes' subjectivity remains fragmentary, divided between his true self and the poetic parade he shows to others.

Nonetheless, Duran argues that Johannes' careful planning of his actions unintentionally exposes him to a different level of existence, something that may eventually trigger his ironic breakthrough into another stage of life.[439] As a matter of fact, just before the above mentioned passage, Johannes discusses marriage – which, as we shall see below, is a typical element of ethical existence – commenting that he has always had 'a certain respect

[438] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, I, p. 575.
[439] Duran, 'Kierkegaard's Christian Reflectivity,' pp. 135-6.

for the ethical.'[440] Duran argues that somebody can reflect himself either in himself or in the other – where the latter can be the other of universal moral law, or the divine Other. When somebody reflects himself into the other/Other, he is thereby exposed to the other's/Other's influence. This happens since the individual sees himself reflected into the other, and by doing so he experiences the possibility of an existence autonomous from his own.[441] Hence, while Johannes' reflectivity is ultimately limited within his personal sphere, he is closer than Don Juan to becoming an individual. Discussing the figure of Don Juan, A himself claims that as soon as the seducer becomes an individual 'the esthetic acquires completely different categories.'[442] It follows that Johannes, in virtue of his reflexivity, is closer to find the way out from the aesthetic life.

Having come at this stage, we can see Kierkegaard's ironic trap. Through the figure of Johannes, Kierkegaard shows us the limits of aesthetic existence – or, drawing on Lear's words, its failure to represent a distinctively human life. The aesthetic life can appear to be pleasurable and playful.[443] However, pleasure and levity are maintained at the heavy cost of sacrificing the possibility of really developing one's own personality, and of ever making a true and meaningful contact with the other. In this sense, pretenses and social practices rooted in the aesthetic sphere are blocked from achieving humanity, insofar as they do not provide the individual the means to really cultivate himself. In turn, the aesthetic subject is dispersed and unable to relate to himself in a way which is not abstract and playful. If my reading is correct, I think that in this lies the aporetic potential of *Either/Or*, in suddenly brining the aesthete to realize the way in which his mindset and activities cuts him out from his own humanity.

It must be noticed that the first part of *Either/Or* contains even grimmer instances of the aesthetical life. These conspicuously darker voices – I am thinking of the *Diapsalmata* and of the mysterious society of the *sumparanekromenoi*, literally "those who are about to die" – are aesthetes who seem to look at life as something totally devoid of meaning. They

[440] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, I, p. 476.
[441] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, I, p. 136.
[442] Ibid., p. 149.
[443] Indeed, some commentators even argue that 'playfulness' is the quality that underlies the different aesthetic voices in *Either/Or*. See Clair, 'L'Esthétique Existentielle,' p. 214.

appear to be acutely aware of the transiency of existence but they fail to attribute to the endless succession of things and events any meaning. Just let us listen to these extracts from the *Diapsalmata*:

'there is a rambling of loquacity that in its interminability has the same relation to the result as the incalculable lists of Egyptian kings have to the historical outcome'[444]

'how sterile my soul and my mind are, and yet constantly tormented by empty voluptuous and excruciating labor pains! Will the tongue ligament of my spirit never be loosened; will I always jabber?'[445]

'ordinarily I have so many and most often such mutually contradictory reasons that for this reason it is impossible for me to state reasons. It also seems to me that with cause and effect the relation does not hold together properly.'[446]

This is indeed the 'despairing aestheticism' that the Hongs speak about. This is the destiny which lies in wait for the seducer who realizes his failure at becoming an individual and at meeting the other, and yet fail to break out of the aesthetic life – in other words, that aesthete who, faced with *aporia,* does not strive forward the achievement of his own humanity but rather retreat into the aesthetic life. In this respect, André Clair is certainly right in claiming that the *Diapsalmata* 'set the scene' and represent the overture to the whole of the first part of *Either/Or*. Accordingly, he finds a circularity within the *Diapsalmata* and the *Seducer's Diary*: the former set the pessimistic tone more or less averted in the following writings, while the latter takes the parable of the aesthetic personality to its despairing finale, thereby justifying the pessimistic tone of the *Diapsalmata*.[447] Failing to become an individual, and yet being painfully conscious of the effects of his reflexivity, he can only fall deeper and deeper in himself. This is the root of his despair. Accordingly, insofar as they show us the extreme consequences of the aesthetic life, both the figures of the seducer and that of the despairing aestheticist are means employed by Kierkegaard to cause ironic shakiness in his readers. By looking at Johannes and listening to the voice speaking in the *Diapsalmata,*

[444] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, I, p. 52.
[445] Ibid., p. 56.
[446] Ibid., p. 60.
[447] Clair, 'L'Esthétique Existentielle,' p. 220.

Kierkegaard's readers can evaluate the nature of aesthetic existence. Were they to realize their failure to become individuals they would be shaken by their new-found counsciousness.

C) On irony as exercised in respect to the ethical life, with particular reference to Either/Or

I shall now turn to examine Kierkegaard's practice of irony as enacted through the pseudonym of Judge William. As already mentioned, Judge William – also known as B – is the pseudonymous author of most of the second volume of *Either/Or* – as well as of a short essay contained in *Stages on Life's Way*.[448] In *Either/Or*, William writes in response to A's description of the aesthetic life. Understanding the latter to be an existence devoid of meaning and filled only by ephemeral enjoyment, William tries to exhort A to embrace an ethical life. My argument is that William's characterization of the aesthetic life, as well as his discussion of the nature of ethical choice allows us to see a particular instantiation of Kierkegaard's practice of irony. Specifically, through William we can see the way in which Kierkegaard practices irony from the standpoint of ethical life, attempting to encourage people in the aesthetic sphere to transit further.[449]

In many ways, the practice of irony underlying B's essays is somewhat similar to that which I have already outlined with respect to A's texts. However, we should notice that one difference between the two sets of writings lies in the fact that there is no indication that Kierkegaard thought that despair – when felt by the aesthete – should necessarily lead to embracing an ethical life. In turn, B's arguments are specifically aimed at promoting the ethical to those who live in the aesthetic sphere. In this sense, we could say that A's irony – even when successful – seems to be open ended, whereas B's definitely aims to open a way towards the ethical. Therefore – much in the same way in which Nietzsche saw in Strauss the representative of the whole class of the cultural Philistines – B addresses A as a means to

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[448] Ian Duckles, 'Derrida, Judge William, and Death,' in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. by Patrick Stokes and Adam Buben (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p. 225.

[449] While William is manifestly a Christian, his religious faith does not seem contribute in a crucial way to his argument concerning the superiority of the ethical life. Hence, William constitutes perhaps Kierkegaard's clearest presentation of the ethical life, and the best place for understanding his practice of irony as exercised through the pseudonymous embracing an ethical perspective. Christian Piller, 'Morality's Place: Kierkegaard and Frankfurt,' in *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 64 (2008), 1207.

reach out to all aesthetes, calling to make a choice in favor of the ethical life.[450] I shall now discuss the nature of the choice that B places in front of A. As we shall see, doing so will allow us to unveil the nature of the ethical life – and by contrast, the nature of the aesthetic one. As we do so, we will become able to see the contours of the ironic practice which ought to prompt the transition from one sphere of life to the other.

It seems to me that William's appeal to A hinges on the claim that 'the person who lives esthetically does not choose.'[451] Of course, William does not mean to deny the obvious truth that people living aesthetically do have preferences and often have to pick among alternative courses of action. In turn, we should understand William as arguing that in the aesthetic life there are no such choices as those demanded by the moral life. According to Christian Piller the latter are those choices characterized by the fact that they involve accepting moral responsibility,[452] and which could be styled as 'real choice[s]'[453] when opposed to all the false choices made within the context of the aesthetic life. We can explain this point by pointing out how ethical choices always involve choosing between alternatives which are axiologically different – accordingly, they are not just a matter of subjective preference, and they involve a real difference something that by transition makes the choice between them "real" too. In turn, choices made in the aesthetic sphere are comparatively false, insofar as they involve option which are ethically indifferent. In this regard, William himself seems to confirm Piller's interpretation when he writes that it is 'the *character indelebilis* of the ethical, that the ethical although it modestly places itself on the same level as the esthetic, nevertheless is essentially that which makes the choice a choice.'[454] Subsequently, William qualifies the aesthetic as 'the indifferent,'[455] insofar as – in spite of the fact that the aesthete may be in practice faced by a host of choices – they are all essentially the same, since to him everything stands qualitatively on the same level. Therefore, the ethical makes 'the choice a choice' insofar as in the ethical choices are made within an axiological context.

[450] Piller, 'Morality's Place,' p. 1209.
[451] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, p. 218.
[452] Ibid., p. 218.
[453] Piller, 'Morality's Place,' p. 1209.
[454] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, p. 218.
[455] Ibid., p. 230.

In the light of his assessment of the aesthetic life as being devoid of qualitative differences, William accuses A of living a superficial existence, and of lacking the capacity for perceiving the moral implications of his choices.[456] Lacking this perception, the aesthete relates to existence in a way which is inescapably playful, never becoming capable of fully engaging with his own existence.[457] Hence, A lives under the delusion of fully engaging with life – and, under the present terms, of having fully achieved a distinctively human life. By pointing out to his blindness to the realm of qualitative difference, B seeks to disrupt A's pretense. In other words, we could say that the transition from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere is marked by ironic disruption insofar as the aesthete is exposed to the realm of ethical values in a way that he finds disruptive.

We can explore this point further by noticing how William defines the choice in favor of the ethical sphere as 'an absolute choice.'[458] By this, he means that the choice for the ethical is an absolute choice insofar as it is a choice in favor of oneself, since by choosing the ethical the aesthete finally "choose himself" by finally committing to engage personally and ethically with his own life.[459] In this sense we can read Piller's claim ethical choices are identified as such on the ground of their structure, not of their content: 'real choice is ethical because of its structure. Whether what we choose in such choices is good or bad is left open.'[460] This follows, insofar as a real choice is made such by the kind of the ethical engagement expressed through it, rather than its actual matter or content. As William put it

'what is important in choosing is not so much to choose the right thing as the energy, the earnestness, and the pathos with which one chooses. In the choosing the personality declares itself in its inner infinity and in turn the personality is thereby consolidated. Therefore, even though a person chose the wrong thing, he nevertheless, by virtue of the energy with which he chose, will discover that he chose the wrong thing.' [461]

[456] Piller, 'Morality's Place,' pp. 500-1.
[457] Piller, 'Morality's Place,' pp. 1211-12.
[458] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, p. 230.
[459] Ibid., p. 230.
[460] Piller, 'Morality's Place,' p. 1216.
[461] Kierkegaard, Either/Or, II, pp. 216-7.

Of course, we should not misunderstand William's words: he is not saying that the configuration of one's own ethical concerns are entirely irrelevant. Rather, he is claiming that what makes somebody able to live in the ethical sphere is the capacity of generating the kind of ethical intensity that allows to exceed the realm of immediacy, an intensity which is first generated the moment in which one chooses to relate personally and morally with existence. This also means that, as William put it, the aesthetic becomes unethical only when chosen after having entered the ethical life, insofar as it is only when this happens that somebody becomes subject to ethical qualifications.[462] Therefore, B's irony operates insomuch as it shows to the aesthetic life its own blindness to the realm of quality and values. We can imagine that such a realization on the aesthete part could come in with the dazing and shocking effects associated to irony. At the same time William accuses A of missing the kind of pathos that allows somebody to properly engage with existence, thereby seeking to ignite in A a passion for affirming his own personality. Just like Socrates, William hopes that his ironic intervention will set A on the path to achieve a distinctively human life.

In order detail in a better way William's ironic practice, we can notice how the latter impacts his communicative strategy. In this respect, William introduces his writings by declaring that his choice of literary genre – his texts are identified by William as essays dressed up as letters – was dictated by considerations very similar to those adduced by Kierkegaard in *The Point of View* in order to justify his practice of "deceiving into the truth." B claims that his choice of writing "essays as letters" was dictated by A's tendency to fail to engage seriously and personally with anything: in his own words, 'You [that is, A] are all too skilled in the art of talking in generalities about everything without letting yourself be personally involved for me to tempt you by setting your dialectical powers in motion.'[463] We can see that B's choice of literary genre mirrors Kierkegaard's proposal of 'deceiving into the truth' the inhabitants of Christendom: in both cases, the idea is that of baiting the reader out of the water by offering him something interesting to "feast on," only to reveal later that such interesting but ultimately indifferent text actually conceals an attempt to cause an existential transformation in its receivers. Accordingly, just like the outcome of Kierkegaard's "deception into the truth" is an event of ironic disruption that shakes the

[462] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, p. 218.
[463] Ibid., p. 13.

single individual out of the crowd, the same should happen to the aesthete who eventually opts to embrace the ethical life.

In conclusion, it is important to underline how William does not believe that choosing the ethical life implies erasing the aesthetic element from somebody's existence. Rather, it is the case that the aesthetic persists also within the ethical life, but only insofar as it persists as something relative and stops being the fulcrum of existence, whereas the ethical becomes the absolute. In this respect, William seems to argue seems that the ethical has always been the "absolute:" it was the aesthete blindness that rendered him unable to see this fact. Accordingly, in the ethical life the aesthetic element becomes what it is and has always been, insofar as it is finally acknowledged in all its relativity and qualitative indifference.[464] This displacement from the pedestal of absolute consideration eventually benefits the aesthetic element. At least, this is what William indicates in his famous discussion of marriage. In this regard, he argues that the relationship between the aesthetic life of the lovers – where love is "just" something playful that has no axiological or moral bearing – and the ethical existence of the married couple – where the intention and the obligation expressed by the lovers has placed 'the stamp of eternity' on their relationship[465] -- as being paradigmatic of that holding between the two spheres of existence. In this respect, William argues that aesthetic love – 'first love' – is not fundamentally altered by its entrance in the ethical, insofar as 'it is merely drawn up into a higher immediate concentricity.' [466] Hence, even though he admits that 'a change has occurred … something that could be termed the metamorphosis of the lover and the beloved into groom and bride,' [467] this change should not be understood as implying a total discontinuity between its two stages: rather, 'the way it happens is that in taking their first love to God the lovers thank God for it. Thereby an ennobling change takes place.'[468] In other words, the fact the two lovers choose themselves entering the ethical life through marriage gives a moral coloration to their love, thereby ennobling it. Elsewhere, William writes that the transition to the ethical life 'transfigures' the aesthetic element.[469] With

[464] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II p. 230.
[465] Ibid., p. 83.
[466] Ibid., p. 81.
[467] Ibid., p. 81.
[468] Ibid., p. 81.
[469] Ibid., p. 330.

respect to our investigation of irony in Williams writings, this shows us how by being ironic he does not aim to cancel what the aesthete is – only to help him to start anew on a blank sheet. Rather, analogously to Lear understanding of irony's place in the therapeutic process, irony serves the goal of ennobling he who is ironized, something obtained by causing a re-orientation in the latter's understanding of the world.

Concluding this brief overview of Kierkegaard's practice of irony through the persona of B, I think it is fair to say that William paints the ironic transition from the aesthetic to the ethical as the realization of one's true self.[470] This follows insofar as, following the transition to the ethical life two transformations take place: 1) we engage absolutely and personally with existence, and 2) we become able to distinguish what is absolute from what is relative. In the light of both, we become closer to achieving a distinctively human life. Within this scenario, *aporia* precedes the transition to the ethical life insofar as one realizes of falling short of achieving humanity the moment it is confronted with the staggering experience of absolute value. Consequently, the aesthete is faced with the choice between generating the kind of pathos necessary for engaging ethically life, or encroaching once more on himself and stay within the aesthetic sphere.

D) On irony as employed with respect to the religious life

I shall now conclude this survey of Kierkegaard's practice of irony in his pseudonymous works by turning to his discussion of the religious sphere. In particular, I shall make reference to Johannes Climacus' characterization of the religious life in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* focusing in the way in which the pseudonym sets the stage for an ironic transition to the sphere of religious life. Famously, Johannes declares that he is not a Christian, and yet the purpose of his efforts is to show how one can become a Christian.[471] Once again, this *persona* repeats the basic strategy underlying Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship: showing while retreating, making way for the reader to appropriate the existence that is offered to him. In order to show the "ironic ladder" to

[470] Interestingly, William discusses the ethical life in terms similar to those employed by Hadot. In particular, he connects the ethical life to the appropriation of the Delphic maxim that Hadot locate sas the ground of all spiritual exercises. Accordingly, we find that the ethical individual 'knows himself. [To him] the phrase *gnothi seauton* is a stock phrase, and in it has been perceived the goal of all a person's striving.' Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, p. 337.
[471] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, pp. 520-2.

Christianity put forward by Johannes Climacus, I shall discuss three elements of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, that is, 1) Johannes' criticism of the aesthetic and disengaged approach to faith 2) the way in which he differentiates the religious from the ethical 3) his further distinction between religiousness "A" and "B." Respectively, 1) allows us to understand the ironic transition from the aesthetic to the religious sphere, 2) allows us to understand the transition from the ethical to the religious sphere, and finally 3) allows us to understand the transition from the generically religious to the properly Christian life.

With respect to point 1), we could say that Johannes Climacus' train of thought is in its essence analogous to Kierkegaard's in *The Point of View*. Johannes claims that his contemporaries understand faith as 'something given.'[472] Because of this, they entertain an aesthetic relationship to faith. Accordingly, they have a relationship to Christianity which may or may not include some sort of interest, but definitely excludes any sort of appropriation – that is, a personal and transformative engagement – with the content of faith.[473] They take the Christian faith for granted, without acknowledging that the latter's true scope is 'to make the single individual eternally happy,' but of course this means that in order to let faith operate, the individual needs to become interested in his own eternal happiness.[474] Therefore, where 'aesthetic pathos draws away from existence, or is in it through illusion … existential pathos deepens itself existing and interpenetrates with consciousness all illusions about it, and becomes more and more concrete by transforming existence in action.'[475]

Famously, in spite of being aimed at people living aesthetically, Johannes' criticism is not mainly levelled to the likes of A and the characters described in the first part of Either/Or – even though, they too could be described as individuals who fail to engage with the Christian faith. Instead, he is aiming to shake in their self-reassurance of being Christians those scholars who treat faith in an objective and disinterested way. They too have an aesthetic and immediate relationship with faith – as much as this relationship can be colored

[472] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 18.
[473] Ibid., p. 19.
[474] Ibid., p. 17.
[475] Ibid., p. 362.

with deep intellectual meditations.[476] In this sense, we can assimilate the philosopher to the seducer insofar as they both fail to properly relate to existence. In different ways, they both fail to exist in touch with themselves and their own personality: while A's aesthetes are trapped in immediacy and despair because they either lack reflectivity or fail to connect the latter to the realm of quality, the speculative scholars fail to properly connect knowing to existing. In this sense, he knows faith but he does not appropriate it, insofar as he does not strive to exist religiously.[477] In both cases, we can see how knowledge is detached from existence, thereby playing a distortive effect. In this sense, Johannes Climacus insistence that Christianity is subjectivity[478] -- by this meaning that Christianity is something that can only be realized through subjective appropriation – serves the need of ironizing those who have an aesthetic relationship to faith, exposing them to the truth that the task of achieving a religious life lies ahead of them.

As regards the relationship between the ethical and the religious life, we need to notice that Kierkegaard often ties together these spheres of existence. We already know that Judge William describes himself as a Christian. In *Stages on Life's Way*, the ethical life is described as a necessary prerequisite of the religious life, so that it is impossible to life the religious life without abiding to the kind of commitments required by the ethical life.[479] In the same text, the ethical is described as being 'only a transitional sphere.'[480] This is justified insofar as the ethical is the sphere of infinite requirement, in the sense that the finite individual is commanded to fulfill an infinite ethical duty of perfecting his character and relationships and eventually become happy. This is something before which the individual 'always goes bankrupt.'[481] Accordingly, what grants access to the religious sphere is the individual's act of repentance before God for having failed to live up to the requirement. Nonetheless, this fulfillment if marked by 'the religious contradiction' of being a perpetually unstable fulfillment which nonetheless allows the individual to live joyfully.[482] Accordingly,

[476] Ibid., p. 20.
[477] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 68.
[478] Ibid., p. 46.
[479] Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, p. 235.
[480] Ibid., p. 430.
[481] Ibid., p. 430.
[482] Ibid., p. 430. Kierkegaard explains this point as follows: 'the religious contradiction: at the same time to lie upon seventy thousand fathoms of water and yet be joyful.'

repentance is both the highest expression of the ethical life, and the foundation of the religious life.[483] This perspective is reinforced by Johannes' claim that 'sin … is the crucial point of departure for the religious existence … it is … the beginning of the religious order of things.'[484] Accordingly, we could say that somebody living in the ethical sphere is ironized when he perceives his failure to achieve the ethical requirement as something structural and not contingent. That is, he must see and come to terms with the fact that such failure is not dependent on any accidental factor, but rather on a defective condition which is deep-seated in his own individual essence. It is possible to become aware of this condition once the individual puts together even the smallest of his guilts with his *telos* of reaching eternal happiness. Insofar as Kierkegaard claims that 'it is the compound that determines the quality,'[485] from this follows that even the smallest guilt turns the quality of our relationship to eternal happiness from innocence to guiltiness. If the individual is inevitably bankrupt before the infinite requirement that ethics confronts him with, this implies that we cannot avoid being guilty.

Subsequently, the individual living in the ethical sphere suffers from *aporia* the moment in which, becoming aware of the unavoidability of his guiltiness, he is now unable to see how he could fulfill his vocation. According to Johannes, the way out of this aporetic condition and into the religious life is found by making an act of repentance. In this sense, just like the aesthete enters the ethical sphere by generating ethical intensity, and acknowledging the ethical dimension as absolute, he who lives ethically enters the religious life by acknowledging the absoluteness of guilt and repenting before God – thereby acknowledging that God, before whom he is found guilty, is indeed the absolute. As a consequence, through the repentance/fulfillment dynamic the ethical is both negated as self-sufficient and redescribed and included in the religious life, thereby becoming the foundation of the latter.[486] In this sense, where Judge William seems to focus more on his human commitment and only secondarily on his religious faith – to the point that Pattison argues that William simply conflates religiousness into ethics[487] – the religious life could be said to

[483] Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way*, p. 430.
[484] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 225.
[485] Ibid., p. 443.
[486] Piller, 'Morality's Place,' p. 1219.
[487] Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 104.

invert this relationship – although, as already mentioned, the ethical remains as an inescapable and necessary component of the religious life.

As regards the third point, that is, the distinction between the so-called "religiousness A," and "religiousness B," Johannes Climacus develops these two categories on the ground of two different ways of relating religious to the absolute truth. In religiousness A, one repents for failing to achieve the infinite requirement and subsequently re-iterates his efforts by resorting to his inner resources. In this sense, Kierkegaard claims that in religiousness A one finds the truth within himself – put differently, in religiousness A one meets God in immanence or within oneself.[488] In religiousness B, truth is decisively located outside the seeker. In this kind of existence – which is the only one which can be most properly called "Christian"[489] – the truth can only be found in the absolute paradox, that is, eternity and truth inhabiting time and space as instantiated by God's incarnation in Jesus Christ.[490] Accordingly, God is only found in transcendence and outside oneself. However, it must be noticed that religiousness B includes and does not cancel religiousness A: it is impossible to appropriate a truth which exists outside the subject, if the passion for appropriating truth religiously is not already present in the individual.[491] What happens, is that the kind of existential pathos expressed by religiousness A now finds its point of contact outside the individual – and in Christ – rather than within the former.[492] This is precisely that in which the paradoxical nature of Christianity lies: 'in its constant use of time and the historical in relation to the eternal,'[493] and most particularly in the incarnation of the eternal in human flesh. Under the present terms, the paradoxical is a name of the ironic: in religiousness A, the individual thinks of having finally achieved a distinctively human life by having found

[488] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 509.
[489] Kierkegaard writes that 'it is possible for someone existing religiously to express their relation to an eternal happiness (immortality, eternal life) outside Christianity, and that surely has been the case; for it has to be said of religiousness A that, even if it had not been presenting paganism it could have been, because it presupposes only human nature in general.' Ibid., p. 468.
[490] Jacoby, 'Kierkegaard on Truth,' pp. 35-6.
[491] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 466.
[492] Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 31.
[493] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 81.

truth and God within himself. However, he is ironically struck by the perspective expressed in religiousness B, that is, that the truth is indeed to be found outside of himself.[494]

The paradox turns guilt-consciousness into sin-consciousness: in guilt-consciousness existence remains and asserts itself within immanence, striving to embrace an immanent truth contained in the subject. In this setting, guilt exists when the subject keeps together within himself guilt with his relationship to eternity. [495] However, just as the paradox signals the entrance of the eternal in the finite – thereby breaking immanence – so guilt-consciousness becomes sin-consciousness insofar as now guilt is connected to transcendence. Hence, if truth is transcendent and outside of us, this means that since the beginning we were guilty in a way that we could not discover through our own means – that is, inasmuch as by remaining within immanence we cannot grasp transcendence, and this can be changed only by transcendence coming to us. Therefore, in sin-consciousness is not a matter of existence asserting itself anymore: existence cannot assert itself over against that which qualitatively exceeds it; subsequently, the sinful consciousness can only declare that it is untruth before the God who is the transcendent truth, thereby finding quietness in God. This follows, insofar as seeing that we are untruth, and that truth is outside of us and transcendent – and yet manifested in the paradox – means to finally come to see our condition as it is. Accordingly, we are now finally in the position to live a distinctively human life, insofar as our social practices and categories – that is, our pretense – are grounded in a correct apprehension and appropriation of the human condition.

This further appropriation of a distinctively human life is achieved – from within the sphere of religiousness B – by constantly going back to this truth – that is, that in ourselves we are untruth, and that we become the truth only by finding God in Christ. Accordingly, Johannes writes that 'the individual's relation to an eternal happiness heightens in proportion to his expression of existential pathos in existing … so when the eternal happiness, it being the absolute τέλος, is absolutely his only comfort … when he is in this state, [this gives] rise to a pathos that is still higher.'[496] This heightening of the individual's relationship to eternal happiness is precisely the result of further ironic defamiliarization, which disrupts

[494] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 492.
[495] Ibid., pp. 445-6.
[496] Ibid., p. 468.

the individual's tendency to put back the truth within himself and therefore on an immanent level, and strengthens even more the existential appropriation that truth is paradoxically transcendent and yet located outside of us in finite reality. As soon as somebody relates aesthetically or ethically to this paradoxically aporetic awareness – that is, that we are both totally disconnected from truth and yet unexplicably able to reach it by faith that in Christ truth has been manifested – the life of religiousness B vanishes.[497] This means that we both have to acknowledge our guiltiness, and to find peace and joy in God as found outside of us in the paradox of incarnation. In this respect, Johannes Climacus writes that as soon as the religious person ceases to be 'suspended … then he is naturally on the point of becoming the mass.'[498] In other words, as soon as he stops relating to the manifestation of the truth as something paradoxical, he is naturally in danger of retreating once more to the previous stages of subjectivity.

E) On irony as exercised in direct communication, with particular reference to the Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses

I shall now turn to Kierkegaard's direct communications. In particular, I shall take into consideration the texts collected in the volume *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*.[499] Insofar as these works represent the first stage of Kierkegaard's religious authorship, I believe that they best represent Kierkegaard's practice of irony as instantiated through his direct communications – especially these are considered alongside his use of irony in the pseudonymous authorship.

In order to shed light on Kierkegaard's use of irony through the *Upbuilding Discourses*, we need to start by taking into consideration what sort of readers he had in mind when he composed these texts. As we already know, the pseudonymous texts were aimed to the deluded victims of Christendom. In turn, in the prefaces written at the beginning of each collection of *Discourses*, Kierkegaard claims that the true reader of this text is the single

[497] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 387.
[498] Ibid., p. 425.
[499] The discourses were first published by Kierkegaard in 6 different collections between 1843 and 1845 (an interval of time that comprises most of his pseudonymous authorship). In the Hongs' edition, the *Discourses* have been collected in a single volume published under the title of *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*.

individual.[500] I shall discuss in depth this category in a later section. However, at this stage I want to put forward the hypothesis – which hopefully shall be justified by the following discussion – that the single individual is he who has left Christendom and has come to live in the sphere of religiousness B. In this respect, the single individual is the one who has already developed a different pretense – possibly thanks to the disrupting effects of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship – and is now trying to live the Christian life in a way that exceeds Christendom's aesthetic Christianity. Seen in this light, the *Upbuilding Discourses* can be described as gifts made by Kierkegaard to the single individual, so that to nourish and support his attempts at living up to his newly shaped ideal of the Christian life.

In this sense, I hold that the *Upbuilding Discourses* are spiritual exercises that aim to strengthen the reader by helping him to become more rooted in his social practices, thereby drawing closer to the ideal of the Christian life. More specifically, as I have already claimed, they are spiritual exercises through which Kierkegaard attempts to activate – borrowing Lear's terminology – a "restricted" variety of ironic shakiness. In other words, they seek to disrupt their receiver's pretense, thereby opening up room for his spiritual growth, without seeking to cause a full aporetic shock that might make him change his pretense. I believe that Kierkegaard did not seek to cause the latter effect, insofar as there was no need to do so, since the single individual is someone who is already living outside and beyond Christendom. Therefore, in accordance with Lear's description of ironic existence, the single individual is someone who perpetually exposes himself to irony in order to be upbuilt further into the truth.

One objection against such a reading of the *Discourses*, could lie in that these writings seem to resist being described as "Christian communications." The apparent strength of such an objection lies draws on that Kierkegaard's later religious texts seem to be more explicitly Christian in terms of tone and setting.[501] Moreover, the category of the "upbuilding" could be seen as making reference to a realm wider than that pertaining exclusively to Christian

[500] For instance, in the preface to the first collection, Kierkegaard writes of that 'single individual whom I with joy and gratitude call *my* reader, that single individual [this book] is seeking, to whom, so to speak, it stretches out its arms, that single individual who is favorably enough disposed to receive it, whether at the time of the encounter it finds him cheerful and confident or "weary and pensive."' Soren Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, ed. and trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 5.
[501] For example, see the *Christian Discourses* published by Kierkegaard in 1848.

religion. In this respect, Johannes Climacus writes in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that the *Discourses*, insofar as they are upbuilding and not Christian, 'just' represent an example of Religiousness A – that is, of pre-Christian, immanent religion.[502] Notwithstanding these critical remarks, I follow George Pattison in seeing the *Upbuilding Discourses* as laying down a trajectory that continues unbroken – despite undeniable developments in terms of style and contents – up until the later "edifying texts" such as *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* and *Works of Love*.[503] As noticed by Pattison, the Biblical and ecclesial setting of the *Upbuilding Discourses* – something that emerges both from their style and their contents – is enough to classify them as decidedly Christian texts.[504] In particular, Pattison underlines how the *Upbuilding Discourses* were written following the stylistic patterns normally employed by the Danish Lutheran preachers of the time – and this, notwithstanding Kierkegaard's denial that the *Discourses* should be classified as sermons.[505] Moreover, they often take as their starting point the Biblical reading offered by the Lutheran lectionary and corresponding to the day of their publication. On top of this, they also often make reference to a church as their place of delivery.[506] Let us now turn to investigate the specific features of the practice of irony that Kierkegaard unfolds through the *Upbuilding Discourses*.

First of all, we should note that in spite of the fact that in *The Point of View* Kierkegaard encourages us to see the *Discourses* as attempts to communicate Christianity directly, these texts are no doctrinal works – that is, they are not textbooks of theology, and we shall find no extended disquisitions of the traditional Christian teachings inside them. Moreover, just like the pseudonymous works, the *Discourses* are deeply personal texts. In

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[502] Pattison writes that 'Climacus is, however, if not right absolutely, then right in this – that overtly Christian concepts and vocabulary are relatively less marked in the majority of the early upbuilding discourses, and that these give greater scope to the exploration of the common human condition than the later works, with their greater emphasis on the application of specifically Christian insights. In theological parlance, the earlier discourses appear to argue "from below," whereas the later may seem more to argue "from above." It follows from my basic position that this, to some extent, is deceptive. Certainly, the earlier discourses start from below, but their achievement is precisely to create a context in which the "above," the perspective of transcendence, first becomes meaningful. There is, then, no finally independent "above" or transcendence.'Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 32.

[503] Ibid., p. 12.

[504] Ibid., p. 33.

[505] Specifically, Kierkegaard connects this denial to the fact that the *Discourses* cannot be called sermons, 'because [their] author does not have the authority to preach.' Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 5.

[506] See Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourse*, p. 21.

this sense, Kierkegaard's switch from indirect to direct communication does not imply a change of focus from the individual situation.[507] Of course, this is a result of Kierkegaard's aim to edify the *single* individual. In his own words, Kierkegaard claims that 'above all, generality is not for upbuilding, because one is never built up in general, any more than a house is erected in general. Only when the words are said by the right person in the right situation in the right way, only then has the saying done everything it can to guide the single individual to do honestly what one otherwise is quick enough to do-to refer everything to oneself.'[508] This approach allows Kierkegaard to frame his direct communications in a way that includes some of the stylistic features typical of dialogues – for instance, direct questions, the juxtaposition and contrast of many divergent voices, etc. . In light of these features, the *Discourses* can be seen as aiming to open up a dialogical communicative space, a place where the readers are offered the chance to appropriate their message.[509] According to George Pattison, this stylistic choice was motivated by Kierkegaard's intention of creating a piece of literature reminiscent of what he called the "Greek style of philosophy." With this expression, Kierkegaard meant the philosophy of Socrates and his contemporaries. He positively contrasted this style of philosophizing – humoristic, dialogic, ethically concerned – with that of Hegelian philosophy – focused on universal truth, and unconcerned with issues of ethics and transcendence.[510] Once again, the "Greek features" of the *Discourses* and their connection to Socratic inquiry are a hint of their underlying ironic intentions, something that ties them to the pseudonymous authorship. Yet another similarity between the *Discourses* and the pseudonymous literature is shown by Kierkegaard's already mentioned refusal to classify them as sermons. As Pattison argues, I believe that such a move was made by Kierkegaard with the aim of encouraging his readers/listeners to focus on the message and not on the messenger.[511]

While the *Discourses* could be seen as instances of religious witnessing – insofar as we could see them as attempts made by Kierkegaard to communicate his religious experience as a Christian ironist living outside of Christendom – as I have discussed in the previous sections

[507] Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 4.
[508] Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 276.
[509] Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, pp. 120-1.
[510] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
[511] Ibid., p. 20.

he also wanted to avoid presenting himself as an extraordinary Christian. Because of this, I think that he wished to put himself forward as someone devoid of any religious authority even when delivering his direct communications; any claim to extraordinariness would have prevented his readers from approaching his texts as works bearing information that one could appropriate for its own edification. Putting himself below the level of an "ordinary pastor" was a way of making his act of witnessing more accessible to the single individual. In other words, the experience of an extraordinary Christian could have easily appeared as something totally beyond the reach of the ordinary person. Therefore, just like in the pseudonymous authorship, Kierkegaard takes a step sideways, although in this case this is really just a half-step, insofar as he is still signing the *Discourses*. Also in this case, his aim is that of leaving the receiver alone with the message, and prevent the messenger from being a possible source of disturbance.

A second characteristic feature of the *Upbuilding Discourses* is that, while they are no doctrinal works, they assume Christian spirituality as their implicit point of reference. As Pattison notices, the *Discourses* often appeal to what the readers already know or is likely to think in terms of their religious opinions.[512] In other words, Kierkegaard takes for granted a certain knowledge of Christian doctrine on the part of the reader – at the very least, takes for granted that sort of knowledge available to the average church-going Dane. This is far from being an irrelevant detail. Instead, we should read this feature of the *Discourses* as being part and parcel of Kierkegaard's diagnosis of Christendom: everyone in Christendom knows what Christianity is in its essence – or at least he thinks so. Nevertheless, he relates to Christianity in such a way that he fails to appropriate it. Accordingly, we could say that the *Discourses* are not concerned with the 'what' but with the 'how' of faith: that is, they do not

[512] See for example his reference in this passage to 'these sacred places,' and to the opinions that he supposes his readers to hold: 'As a matter of fact, many good things are talked about in these sacred places. There is talk of the good things of the world, of health, happy times, prosperity, power, good fortune, a glorious fame. And we are warned against them; the person who has them is warned not to rely on them, and the person who does not have them is warned not to set his heart on them. About faith there is a different kind of talk. It is said to be the highest good, the most beautiful, the most precious, the most blessed riches of all, not to be compared with any thing else, incapable of being replaced. Is it distinguished from the other good things, then, by being the highest but otherwise of the same kind as they are-transient and capricious, bestowed only upon the chosen few, rarely for the whole of life? If this were so, then it certainly would be inexplicable that in these sacred places it is always faith and faith alone that is spoken of, that it is eulogized and celebrated again and again.' Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, pp. 9-10.

seek to introduce their readers to new knowledge, insofar as the theological knowledge of the average Dane is deemed sufficient to grasp the content of the *Discourses*. In turn, Kierkegaard wishes to encourage his readers to look at what they know from a different point of view – something that they have already started doing, if I am correct in interpreting the single individual as someone living in different categories than those of Christendom.[513] In other words, we could say that the *Discourses'* "upbuilding factor" lies in their capacity to help their readers to achieve a different and existentially deeper appropriation of what they already know. At the same time, this means that – as I shall discuss in greater depth below – they are able to ironize their receivers insofar as they are likely to question deeply-held assumptions concerning the nature of faith, God, prayer, and other typical elements constellating Christian spirituality – just to make an example, this seems to be the assumption clearly laid out at the beginning of the first discourse, entitled 'On the expectancy of faith.'[514]

In terms of what this process of upbuilding looks like, I follow Pattison in claiming that the *Discourses* tell something like a "story of the self," which unfolds as the subject endeavors to appropriate more deeply the nature of Christian existence.[515] This appropriation is realized through a process of transformation by which the self progressively "becomes nothing" – that is, it lowers itself before God, learning to lean on him in all things. [516] As Pattison put it 'to become as nothing … is to have arrived at the end of the spiritual struggle to know and to become who we are. It is also, as such, to return to our original created being as bearers of the image of God, and to become capable of fulfilling our primary creaturely vocation: to worship and to adore God our maker.'[517] In this respect, Kierkegaard even boldly proclaims that 'there is truly only one eternal object of wonder – that is God – and only one possible hindrance to wonder – and that is a person when he himself wants to be something.' [518] Under the present terms, we could say that there is only one eternal object of aporetic unfamiliarity – which as such is capable of producing life-transforming wonder

[513] Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 19.
[514] See Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, pp. 9ff.
[515] Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 100.
[516] Ibid., p. 52.
[517] Ibid., p. 56.
[518] Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 226.

– and that the only obstacle to this unfamiliarity is the person's stubbornness to pretend, that is, to put himself forward in such a way that does not acknowledge his own creatureliness.

In this light, it is indeed appropriate to compare the *Discourses* to a mirror held by Kierkegaard in front of his readers.[519] This reflects back to them the image of their condition with respect to the Christian ideal, thereby allowing them to see their own limitations and contradictions – that is, whether or not and in which ways they still think of themselves as being something before God. These limitations and contradictions manifest both in the believers' incapacity to fulfill their wishes, and in their impossibility to resist the sinful temptations they are continually subjected to. At the same time, the *Discourses* point to God and expose the way through which the believer can grow in appropriating his own creaturehood.[520]

The ironic potential of the *Discourses* lies precisely in their capacity to expose the single individual to the full reality of his dependency on God. This is caused in a disruptive way, insofar as Kierkegaard does not seek to do this by introducing new doctrines or ideas, but – as I have already mentioned – by looking in a different way at things which are already known and as a result are familiar to his readers. By making reference to an ecclesial setting, in writing texts that look like sermons but cannot be categorized as such, and by employing Biblical texts drawn from the standard Danish Lutheran lectionary as the *Discourses* starting point, Kierkegaard aims to make unfamiliar and strange, concepts and rituals that belong to the normal religious experience of his contemporaries – e.g., the sacraments, church gatherings, sermons, categories such as sin, repentance, faith, etc. . In other words, the ironic potential of the discourses lies in their capacity to reveal the true meaning of the expressions and notions that have become worn out by use and tradition. Therefore, the history of the self that starts unfolding the moment the single individual approaches the *Upbuilding Discourses* as spiritual exercises is marked by ironic events of limited range, insofar as he

[519] See above, note 431.

[520] This point bears some resemblances to the theme of the sermon placed a the end of *Either/Or*, which is perhaps best summarized by the claim that 'therefore this thought, that in relation to God we are always in the wrong, is an upbuilding thought; it is upbuilding that we are in the wrong, upbuilding that we are always in the wrong. It manifests its upbuilding power in a twofold way, partly by putting an end to doubt and calming the care of doubt, partly by animating to action.' Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, II, p. 445.

comes to experience the same old Christian message and its categories in a new and unsettling way.

A clear example of this dynamic can be seen in the following passage:

'As a matter of fact, many good things are talked about in these sacred places. There is talk of the good things of the world, of health, happy times, prosperity, power, good fortune, a glorious fame. And we are warned against them; the person who has them is warned not to rely on them, and the person who does not have them is warned not to set his heart on them. About faith there is a different kind of talk. It is said to be the highest good, the most beautiful, the most precious, the most blessed riches of all, not to be compared with anything else, incapable of being replaced. Is it distinguished from the other good things, then, by being the highest but otherwise of the same kind as they are-transient and capricious, bestowed only upon the chosen few, rarely for the whole of life? If this were so, then it certainly would be inexplicable that in these sacred places it is always faith and faith alone that is spoken of, that it is eulogized and celebrated again and again.'[521]

As we can see, in this passage Kierkegaard starts off by making reference to that which is 'talked about in these sacred places [that is, in the Lutheran churches of his days].' Subsequently, he remarks how preachers from the pulpit often declares faith to be 'the most blessed riches of all.' This is clearly treated as something obvious by Kierkegaard. However, he immediately problematizes this claim, by insinuating in his reader the suspect that, after all, they may have misunderstood what they have heard preached from the pulpit: if faith is something made of the same substance of the other riches, the emphasis placed upon it would be unjustifiable. This is the moment when the spiritual exercise begins: if the single individual engages with it properly – that is, in a way that might be conducive to a process of self-transformation – he necessarily must go through an aporetic experience. This follows, insofar as one of the main categories of the Christian faith – indeed, the category of faith itself – it is made suddenly unfamiliar to him. To the extent in which the single individual thinks of himself as a Christian – at least, this is what Kierkegaard supposed of his readers – this means that his own appropriation of the Christian faith is put into question. In a deep

[521] Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, pp. 9-10.

sense, there is a moment when the single individual is not sure anymore concerning his own Christianity – this, in spite of the fact that, if my reading is correct, he has already left behind Christendom's aesthetic Christianity.

At this point, Kierkegaard starts to reason with the single individual, developing a new understanding of faith. Eventually, he concludes that 'what, then, is the eternal power in a human being? It is faith,'[522] or, in other words, the eternal power in a human being is faithfully leaning on God – thereby fully appropriating his creatureliness and becoming 'as if he was nothing' before God. On top of this, Kierkegaard grants the single individual the keys for exercising irony by himself by claiming that 'one is finished with the future only by conquering it, but this is precisely what faith does, since its expectancy is victory. Every time I catch my soul not expecting victory, I know that I do not have faith.'[523] In other words, at least with particular respect to the restricted field of the category of faith, Kierkegaard indicates the means by which the single individual is able to test his own condition. Under the present terms, we could say that the single individual can verify that he is failing to live up to the Christian ideal of faithful living each time that his pretense is pervaded by a lack of trust towards overcoming future difficulties. This is sign of a lack of faith of God, and thereby a lack of faith as such.

As a conclusion to this section, I shall comment on another feature of the *Discourses*, that both ties them more closely to the pseudonymous works, and allows them to grasp a second aspect of their ironic potential. Pattison notices that 'if "becoming as nothing" is the climax of the religious path of the discourses, it is not the conclusion of that path. In a sense it is only the beginning.'[524] From their nothingness Christians become now free to develop their character in a godly fashion, living lives marked by 'values as humility, meekness, modesty and self-effacement that are represented in the *Discourses* by a sequence of types … Paul, Job, Anna, John the Baptist, the Woman who was a Sinner, and others … as models to be emulated they give concrete form to what, otherwise, would be merely abstract formulae.'[525] On the one hand, this shows that the use of "stagings" which I have previously

[522] Ibid., p. 20.
[523] Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 27.
[524] Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 62.
[525] Ibid., p. 62.

discussed as a recurrent element in the pseudonymous works is also present in the direct communications. On the other hand, this shows another way in which Kierkegaard attempts to make unfamiliar a number of otherwise well-known Biblical characters. In this sense, in the *Discourses* Kierkegaard attempts to conjure this figures as living and engaging portrayal of the Christian ideal, saving them from becoming distant and ultimately alien people who have lived in a far and half-mythical past.

Kierkegaard's reference to such figures would make us suppose that we can take them as exemplars of individuals who have achieved a degree of nothingness before God which is out of the ordinary. This allows us to clarify one possible source of ambiguity concerning his notion of 'becoming nothing' – that is, that Kierkegaard is advocating some sort of quietism. In this respect, it could be helpful to notice that he underlines how 'just as knowing oneself in one's own nothingness is the condition for knowing God, so knowing God is the condition for the sanctification of a human being by God's assistance and according to his intention. Wherever God is in truth, there he is always creating. He does not want a person to be spiritually soft and to bathe in the contemplation of his glory, but in becoming known by a person he wants to create in him a new human being.'[526] Accordingly, becoming nothing before God is to appropriate our creatureliness and thereby be jolted into action and into the Christian life. Figures such as Paul, Anna, and John the Baptist make this immediately evident, by showing concrete instances of "nothingness in action." As Kierkegaard put it, these biblical characters are able to support the single individual in his 'mournful moments,' insofar as he can find in them a source of strength and courage, contemplating how 'in severe spiritual trials and anxieties of heart [they] kept their minds free, their courage uncrushed, and heaven open.'[527] Subsequently, contemplating these figures is a means for reinforcing "action in nothingness" and not a way for stifling human life – the same is true for the direct contemplation of the "eternal object of wonder," and for the consequent "becoming nothing" that this triggers in us. With respect to Johannes Climacus' description of religiousness B, the dynamic of becoming nothing can be seen as another description of our appropriation of the fact that truth and the plenitude of being that we are called to achieve as an infinite requirement lie outside of us, and that consequently we are untruth and nothing. If this is

[526] Kierkegaard, *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*, p. 325.
[527] Ibid., p. 7.

correct, this is another reason for seeing a connection between the goals of the pseudonymous and the signed authorships.

Chapter 2) On Poetry, Irony and God: on the connection between the ironic and the poetical life from a Christian point of view

2.1 Kierkegaard and Religious Poetry: The Religious Poet

Having discussed the outlines of Kierkegaard's practice of irony, I shall devote the next few sections to the exploration of the way in which Kierkegaard understood **his authorial position**. **My reason for exploring this theme is an extension of my goal of seeking possible ways of living the philosophical life in a post-Enlightenment setting. I shall now seek to show in what way Kierkegaard framed his practice of philosophy. I believe that we can find an answer to this question by looking at the way in which Kierkegaard discusses the nature of poetry, and how he describes the figure of the religious poet. In other words, if Lear portrays himself as a philosopher-psychotherapist and Nietzsche portrays himself as a genealogist-prophet-philosopher, what sort of philosopher Kierkegaard thinks he is? Basically, I shall argue that – at least from a certain point in authorship onwards – Kierkegaard understands himself as a religious poet. Accordingly, we could say that retrospectively both his aesthetic and religious works should be understood as the compositions of a religious poet. In other words, both Kierkegaard communicative strategies could be described as the literary creations of a particular kind of poet. However, in order to be able to give a full account of the particular kind of poetic figure represented by Kierkegaard, I shall have to discuss two other forms of poetry which appears in his writings. To do so, I shall draw on Joel Rasmussen's illuminating book *Between Irony and Witness: Kierkegaard's Poetics of Faith, Hope, and Love*.**

Towards the end of his book, Rasmussen runs through three different descriptions of the poet present in Kierkegaard's work. First, Kierkegaard discusses the Romantic poet, that is, he who imagines and creates alternatives to the given actuality, thereby abstracting and fleeing from reality. [528] Unsurprisingly given his distrust of the Romantics, this is a purely negative connotation of the concept of poet. Kierkegaard's second description of the figure of the poet is that of the "Christian poet," whose goal is not to imagine alternatives to actuality, but rather to depict ways in which the Christian ideal – as incarnated in Jesus' life – can be actualized. This is the category within which Kierkegaard places himself. Thirdly, Kierkegaard discusses the figure of God as the divine poet.[529] **As much as the next couple of sections might feel like a diversion from my main argument, I hold that this discussion of Kierkegaard's understanding of poetry is integral to my research. Insofar as the object of this dissertation includes trying to get a hint into possible ways of living the philosophical life after the Enlightenment, looking into Kierkegaard's self-presentation of his authorial activity means looking into the religious poet as a way in which "philosophy as a way of life" was practiced after the 18th century. Moreover, as it will be evident from the following discussion, it is impossible to fully make sense of Kierkegaard's understanding of the Christian poet without connecting and distinguishing it from the Romantic poet and from God understood as a poet.**

I am aware that connecting Kierkegaard's view of Christian poetry to his practice of irony could be a possible source of confusion. And it could be argued that under Kierkegaard's own terms when he is acting as a poet is not being an ironist. However, it should be noticed that throughout my thesis I am operating taking as my point of departure Lear's account of irony. Of course, this is true with the exception of those places where I am giving a close reading of other sources discussing the concept of irony, such as in the historical sections at the beginning of the first chapter. While I have previously underlined how Lear's account of irony is indirectly indebted to Kierkegaard's doctoral thesis, it is nonetheless true that Lear developed his work without consciously drawing from this text – as we know, he tends to look at the mature Kierkegaard, and in *A Case for Irony* most of the explicit mentions of Kierkegaard are made with reference to his journals. Hence, by

[528] Joel D. S. Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness: Kierkegaard's Poetics of Faith, Hope, and Love* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 170.
[529] Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, pp. 171-2.

interpreting Kierkegaard's account of Christian poetry as fundamental to his practice of Socratic irony, I am claiming that the Christian poet acts in such a way that is fundamentally different from Kierkegaard's negative accounts of irony discussed in his doctoral dissertation – and which rather seem to be the province of the Romantic poet.

It must be noticed that Kierkegaard's different discussions of the figure of the poet follow a somewhat chronological development. In this respect, in his early works we find a large number of critical remarks concerning poets – mostly condensed in his scorn over Romantic poetry. However, the testimony of Kierkegaard's journals shows a clear transition towards a more appreciative understanding of poetic activity. As underlined by Sylvia Walsh, from his journal entries written around the time of his "late" religious writings, we gather that Kierkegaard understood more and more his role as that of a poet – and his works themselves as the fruit of a 'poet-communication.' This claim conforms to what Kierkegaard says about his authorship in *The Point of View* – that is, of having employed esthetic means to communicate a religious content.[530] More specifically, Kierkegaard understood his work as being concerned with the communication of the Christian ideal in a 'pathos-filled' way – that is, one able to attract his audience to embody that ideal.[531]

Contrarily to the practice of Romantic poetry, as a religious poet Kierkegaard is not interested in inventing archetypes of ideal humanity, but rather in expressing a pre-given ideal – which is, as it were, made available to the poet before the composition of his work. Therefore, all that Kierkegaard does as a poet is to describe the ideal, rather than imaginatively construct it.[532] In this respect, whether Kierkegaard's characters are directly taken from the Bible or they are his own inventions – such as for instance the tax-collector from *Fear and Trembling* – they differ from figures like Byron's Manfred, insofar as the latter is totally the product of the genius-poet and his creative *èlan*. In turn, Kierkegaard makes his task that of singing the ideal – not to make it up – and to do so in a way which makes it existentially and emotionally relatable to his readers. As Sylvia Walsh put it, Kierkegaard describes dialectically 'the Christian existential determinants […] both in terms of their purely ideal definition and in terms of their highest or strictest expression in

[530] Sylvia Walsh, 'Kierkegaard: poet of the religious,' in *Kierkegaard on Art and Communication*, p. 4.
[531] Ibid., pp. 4-5.
[532] Ibid., p. 6.

existence.'[533] This means that on the one hand, Kierkegaard glorifies the Christian life, while on the other hand he is equally careful to expose the difficulties that hinder its actualization. Therefore, the vocation of the religious poet is that of depicting different ways in which the Christian ideal can be actualized, seeking to arouse his readers' passion towards actualizing the Christian ideal. This implies that the figures summoned by the Christian poet are not meant to produce amusement: ideally, they should be embraced and appropriated by readers; the purpose of the religious poet is not to communicate knowledge but to "awaken" the readers and affect them viscerally. [534]

It follows that religious poetry satisfies two different functions. On the one hand, the religious poet sings the glory of the Christian ideal each time he portrays it, of generating in his audience a passion for excellence and for achieving the Christian ideal; on the other hand, the religious poet is the composer who "builds" the images of the Christian ideal through which his readers interface. Of course, this distinction is in large measure surreptitious: the religious poet must be both – singer and composer – in order to fulfill his duties. It is obvious that a poet-singer must be a poet-composer too – that is, in order to have something to sing about. At the same time, the poet-composer always compose with the aim of singing the ideal of Christian living.

Kierkegaard's discussion of religious poetry finds its inception in his early dissertation on irony. In the midst of his criticism of Romanticism, Kierkegaard discusses the notion of living poetically, contrasting the Romantic and the Christian points of view[535] While the Romantic poet seeks to compose himself and his environment, the Christian 'comes to the aid of God, becomes so to speak his co-worker in completing the good work God himself has begun.'[536] Furthermore, the Romantics exalt genius and originality not just with respect to one's literary composition, but also as regards one's own character and self-formation. By contrast, Kierkegaard emphasizes that the Christian way of doing poetry implies allowing God to form and school us. Hence, as opposed to Romantic self-creation, the Christian seeks to conform herself to God's self.[537]

[533] Ibid., p. 6.
[534] Hughes, *Kierkegaard and the Staging of Desire*, p. 5.
[535] Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, p. 25.
[536] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony,* p. 280.
[537] Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, p. 52.

As Rasmussen underlines, Kierkegaard's understanding of Christian living as the act by which one lets God compose one's self, gives ground to a theological poetics, or a '"theopoetics," which embraces the Romantic emphasis on poetic creativity but locates the true home of that creativity in the divine author.'[538] In other words, the Christian starts by giving up any pretense – in the common sense of this word – of creativity, and submits to the evidence that just as God is the source of all beings, so he is ultimately in charge of shaping them and leading them to express themselves fully. In the case of human beings, this amounts to achieving their own humanity by living a life composed according to the will of the Creator. In this perspective, the Christian poet becomes the catalyst of God's action: insofar as he is a Christian, he lets himself be shaped by God; insofar as he is a Christian poet, he seeks to become a vessel of this creating and shaping activity, producing means that facilitate and extend God's action.

The Christian poet's willingness to be composed by God and to give up on any pretense of being the original and ultimate composer of his materials, is also connected to his "structural" incapacity to fully depict his object – that is, God and his features, actions, and character. For instance, if we hold the view that God is good, that God is love, that God is mercy, and yet that he is all three of these "things" in a way that transcends human understanding, it follows that no metaphor, simile, story or any other poetical means will be sufficient to describe him perfectly. This does not happen because a particular Christian poet is contingently lacking in skill, but rather because of a disproportion between the nature of the composing subject and that of the composed object. In other words, we cannot compose the object of Christian poetry because it is "too much" for us. All we can do then, is to receive God's composition and to repeat it mimetically – hence composing it in a "derivative" sense. Such an understanding of poetical composition can be described, following Carl S. Hughes, as a "staging" of the divine which entails a renunciation to

[538] Ibid., pp. 52-3. Moreover, see George Pattison who provides a useful contrast between these two attitudes to creativity and self-creation: 'In the poetic universe the joy and harmony of aesthetic experience are bought at the price of a dissociation of the self from the real world, the loss, rather than the finding, of the self;' 'the aesthetic personality conceives of himself and lives his life as if it were simply a dramatic idea, a role, a part he has thought up for himself is prepared to concede to them. If there is to be a question of life basing itself on a foundational projective act, the true source of such an act must be God – and not the individual's self-dramatisation, which can produce no more than a shadow-world … if life itself is the play, then to refuse our part is to refuse life; to accept is, on the other hand, to realise that true transfiguration which takes place, not on the stage or in art, but where life itself becomes transparent to its divine ground;' in George Pattison, *Kierkegaard, The Aesthetic and the Religious* (London: SCM Press, 1999), pp. 47, 135.

exhaust what is put on stage. [539] When composition gives way to singing, this leads the audience to perceive the disproportion between the expression and the expressed. However, as already mentioned, the breakdown of a staging is its success.[540] Hence, the original composition which is to be repeated is received like a gift from the Creator rather than being shaped by human inspiration, being re-composed as an act of devotion meant to lead others into the presence of the transcendent original.

The preeminence of God's creative power and the acknowledgment of this condition by the Christian poet means that God originally provides all the content of the Christian poet's poetry. As Rasmussen puts it, 'while, [Kierkegaard] acknowledges that many a human poet can work charming, provocative, comic, or tragic variations upon the actual world, he nonetheless affirms that these are so many imaginative variations in miniature on God's universal creativity.'[541] While the Romantic poet in particular, and the secular poet in general endlessly experiments in their self-delusion of originality, the Christian poet acknowledges and consciously poetizes according to the awareness that all creativity is God's. However, God's creative act comes to be a part of the poet's life: part of what it means to live poetically as being shaped by God is to be shaped into being a poet and into being creative. Through the poet, God comes to repeat "indirectly" his original act of poetical composition: creation and human perfection are recreated in poetry as they are sung by the poet.

As a conclusion to this section, we should mention another element that distinguishes divine and human creativity – that is, according to the understanding of Christian theology: the sinful state of the human condition. Sin separates the human being from achieving its ideal, and no human is able to bring about the reconciliation between the factual and the ideal, insofar as human creativity in itself is also corrupted by sin – hence, it is unable to express the ideal appropriately. As opposed to any impossible poetic reconciliation, true reconciliation is achieved by the divinity: finding inspiration in God instead of drawing on his own resources, a human poet can reproduce true reconciliation in his art, therefore attaining what Kierkegaard calls "true art" –

[539] Huges, *Kierkegaard and the Staging of Desire*, p. 5. For a prime example of what Hughes means, within Kierkegaard's production itself, see Johannes Climacus' "fairy tale" in *Philosophical Fragments*.
[540] Ibid., pp. 5-6.
[541] Ibid., p. 55.

in this re-elaborating a notion he obtains from Poul Möller.[542] Rather than imagining an abstract and fictional reconciliation between the factual and the ideal, the religious poet draws on the real reconciliation achieved by God in and through Jesus Christ, faithfully reproducing the pattern in his art. Where the Romantic poet imagines alternatives to the given actuality, through which ideality and actuality are falsely reconciled, the Christian poet endavors to depict how to actualize human existence in faithfulness to the Christian ideal as revealed in Christ's life.[543] On this note, let us move to the next section, where I shall go deeper into the connection between the incarnation and Kierkegaard's understanding of poetry and of God as a poet.

2.2 Kierkegaard and Religious Poetry: God the Poet

As Rasmussen brilliantly shows, Kierkegaard's view of the Christian poet as someone letting himself be "poetically composed" is underpinned by a view of divine Creation as an act of poetic composition. Accordingly, God is understood as the *locus* where true creativity originates,[544] the 'poet *par excellence*, in comparison to whom even the most "cultivated" of human poets appears woefully effete.'[545] The crux of the relationship of composition between God and his creatures is the incapacity of human poets to produce a true reconciliation. As opposed to human beings and all of their creations, where sin separates the divine ideal from the actual human condition, perfection is actuality within the Godhead. However, this would still be "useless" to humans, if God had not in some way given access to this ideality to sinful creatures. Even if they were aware of the existence of actual perfection as it is instantiated in God, human beings would still be left to their own devices, if all they could count on were their own means. These would be irremediably tainted by sin, and unable to close the gap between the actual and the ideal.

God obviates to this condition by effecting himself the realization of ideality into created actuality. Through the Incarnation, God the divine poet self-introduces himself into his poem. Borrowing from Kant, we could say that through the incarnation God creates the transcendental

[542] Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, p. 58.
[543] Ibid., pp. 170-2.
[544] Ibid., p. 52-3.
[545] Ibid., pp. 52-3.

possibility for the achievement of divine ideality in the created realm:[546] The necessary and real conciliation between the created condition and the divine ideal is once and for all, perfectly, and completely performed in Jesus Christ.[547] Given this picture of God as introducing himself into the "world-poem" in and through the character of Jesus, we can see how the difference between the creativity of the Romantic poet and that of the Christian one originates in the Incarnation. In this respect, Jesus acts as an immanent window on the transcendent world where true creativity comes from, and in this sense he stands as the fountainhead of Christian poetry. Thanks to him, Christian poetry is able to re-present and repeat the reconciliation achieved by God through its own means – be it by contrast with less than reconciled figures, or by sketching the image of Christ or of one of his imitators. The reconciliation is not literally or numerically repeated: once the transcendental – and ontological – possibility for imagining and achieving it has been reached, there is no need to do so once again. Rather, it is imaginatively repeated: by presenting the ideal made flesh – again, be it directly or contrastively – according to their own vocabularies, audiences and insight, Christian poets produce over and over again a fresh image of the concrete ideal. In this way they make the concrete ideal available to their contemporaries, as something they may passionately relate and conform to.

Crucially, the concreteness of the reconciliation orchestrated through the divine poem springs from the origin of the latter in the eternal "Word." While the human poet creates through an act of abstraction from actual life, God proceeds by beginning with the eternal "Word," subsequently actualizing and embodying it in history.[548] If human poetry is instead an act of thinning and abstraction, and divine poetry is an act of deepening and thickening of reality by infusing reality more fully with the divine essence, it follows that human poetry does not create, but rather is a move towards the evaporation of the real. If God is the only true creator, and he creates originally by speaking into existence the divine poem, it follows that God is also the only true existing being, bestowing secondary or dependent existence to his creatures. In this sense, God exists and creates not in an eminent sense[549] – that is, God does not simply enjoy a higher

[546] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004), p. 120*passim*.
[547] Rasmussen, *Between Irony & Witness*, p. 55.
[548] Ibid., p. 72.
[549] Ibid., p. 72.

level of existence and creative power God's creativity and existence exceed comparisons with any finite reality, and any such comparison has at best a metaphorical value.

Human creativity redeems itself by choosing to rely on God's truthful and original power of composing the poem of reality. The incarnation is the apex of such a process, at the same time giving creation full access to the heart of the divinity. Poets are created creatures in need of reconciliation just like anyone else;[550] by giving themselves into the hands of the divine poet, by letting themselves be conformed in the light of God's self-inclusion in his poem, human poets find redemption for themselves and for their acts of creativity. As Rasmussen puts it, 'God "fulfills" the poetic production of creation by becoming a part of it in the sense that human poets cannot;' in Christ 'God conforms human will and divine will in such a "positively free" manner as to live poetically in the fullest sense, indeed, in such a way as to "fulfill" creation by including the creator within the creation.'[551] In other words, by finally showing the pattern incarnated, reality lets itself be fully composed in Jesus, thus being fulfilled by coming to its pre-fixed goal. Through participating in Christ, human poets can also join into his act of fulfilling creation, preparing the way so that this event can spread and sink into creation.

Following Rasmussen, we can identify the two crucial conditions of Kierkegaard's theological poetics are *imagination* and *will*: to imagine God as the creator living poetically in Christ, and to will to conform one's life to Christ's.[552] The poetical productions thus engendered also aim at generating these two conditions in their receivers, presenting to the imagination a particular understanding of God, and enticing the will to absorb the criterion of human life revealed through it.[553]

[550] Rasmussen, *Between Irony and Witness*, p. 75.
[551] Ibid., p. 82.
[552] Ibid., p. 130.
[553] Ibid., p. 144.

Chapter 3) On Imitating the Supreme Ironist: Kierkegaard on irony and what it means to become a true Christian

3.1 The Single Individual

The next and final step of this journey into Kierkegaard's work concerns the ideal of human excellence which he tried to propagate – that is, *who* Kierkegaard wanted the *receiver* of his work to become. Here we must consider what implications the Incarnation brings for human existence. As we shall see in detail below, this is nothing less than following Christ. In other words, the existential ideal set forth by Kierkegaard is that of Christ as the exemplar of perfect human life, thereby calling Christians to the *Imitatio Christi*. I shall begin by giving an overview of this theme.

During our discussion of indirect and direct communication we mentioned the category of the single individual. [554] As we shall see below, this is the name for the existential condition of someone who has been struck by irony. More specifically, we could say that one becomes the single individual by discovering the reality of sin; this happens when our pretense to human excellence is contrasted with and ironized by Christ as the ideal of perfect humanity. Accordingly, Kierkegaard both addresses and hopes to "create" his own audience. As we are ironized, we become single individuals as we are grabbed out of the public as a consequence of the sudden anxiety we now experience concerning our pretense. As we become able to experience the gap which separates us from our ideals, this experience also singularizes us, re-activating our capacity for what Kierkegaard calls the crucial either/or. From the aporetic situation, a person has to make a choice: he can either turn to Christ as the one able to heal his sinful condition, or he can flee. However, this meeting with Christ can only fully play out its consequences when the single individual seeks – in obedience to the Ideal and the healing that he has received – a thorough change in lifestyle. It is not enough to acknowledge Christ as a teacher and savior: to truly embrace Christ and emerge out of Christendom and the public, a person has to *imitate* him in the life that

[554] Originally, this expression meant to indicate – and hide the identity at the same time – of no one but Regine Olsen. Eventually, it became a cypher and a broader concept to indicate a certain kind of figure, who Kierkegaard envisioned as his own ideal reader. Insofar as here I am addressing Kierkegaard's late production, the expression 'single individual' is meant to be read in the second, broader, and philosophical nuance. See George Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion, and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 160-1.

he leads. By doing so, the single individual recasts his pretense as a Christian, setting the Teacher as the ideal of his pretense. I shall first address the category of the single individual; second, I will discuss the figure of Christ as the teacher and savior who addresses the single individual and receives/is received by him. Finally, I will elucidate Kierkegaard's interpretation of the theme of the *imitatio Christi*.

In the introductions to his *Upbuilding Discourses* Kierkegaard identifies the single individual as his reader and audience of choice, while in *The Point of View*, he describes the single individual as the destination of the movement of indirect communication. Here, Kierkegaard writes that the maieutic movement consists in shaking off '"the crowd" in order to get hold of the "single individual," religiously understood.'[555] Coupled with Kierkegaard's insistence that the single individual is his only true reader, this tells us something essential about this category. The single within the crowd is grabbed through the use of maieutic communication, and made fit to receive direct communication – as previously discussed, one is attracted by the maieutic and subsequently receives the upbuilding or, one first moves through reflection in order to get to simplicity. The crowd is by definition a large group of individuals, so maieutic practice does not create the single individuals, but rather makes the single individual emerge. This is comparable to Lear's conception of humanity as something that has to be achieved. While there is a sense in which we are human beings in virtue of our biological origins, there is another sense in which we become human by growing up to human excellence, undergoing different ironic breaks when this becomes necessary. I think, that this is what Kierkegaard means by shaking off the crowd: single individuals make up the crowd but they are as it were submerged under the layer of homogenization that engulfs them. People have a public and collective existence within the crowd, but what they lack is inwardness and singularity, while they need to develop both in order to achieve human excellence. This will come at the cost of breaking their illusions and the pretenses that go with them. By being shaken out of the crowd, they are as it were singularized in the moment that irony causes them to break with the homogeneity imposed on them.

The art historian Giorgio Vasari defined sculpture as the art that 'taking away the superfluous from the affected matter, reduces this to the form of the body present within the

[555] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 9.

artificer's mind.' [556] Figuratively, the ironic action of indirect communication works in a similar way: shaking the crowd by attacking its assumption of having achieved Christianity, it causes the single individual's lineaments to appear, once what is "superfluous" – or in this case we should rather say parasitic – has been removed. Just as the form of the sculpture is in some sense already present within a block of marble, so the single individual is already existent within the crowd, and yet "loses himself" in the crowd. Just as at the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death* Kierkegaard defines the human being as a spirit and then goes on to say that spirit is the self and the self is 'a relation that relates itself to itself;'[557] so we can understand "being a single individual" both as an intrinsic property – that is, one that cannot be dispensed with when it comes to describe something's essential nature – and as a relational one. We can both say that "the human being is in itself a single individual," and that to be a single individual is also a matter of standing in the right relationship to something or someone. This is irony's space of action, such that it breaks open our false sense of accomplishment and takes us to re-evaluate our relationship to our ideal of human excellence.

In the specific context of Kierkegaard's work, to re-evaluate such a relationship means to stand differently with respect to Jesus Christ, insofar as he is understood to be the clearest and perfect manifestation of human excellence. To be shaken out of the crowd is to be brought before Jesus Christ as God. Of course, given his omnipresence the single individuals were already standing in God's presence: in this sense, we can legitimately say that to be a single individual is an intrinsic quality to human beings, insofar as there is no way for them not to entertain the sort of relationship with God that makes them into single individuals; however, this relationship can become lost upon them -- and this is the origin of the gap between their ideals and their actual status. This signals the entrance of the single individual in a new existential and ontological situation. Thus, when the single individual responds to irony by inhabiting his pretense, i.e. following Christ in a different way, he flees the crowd by taking up different social practices and revising his or her own ideal of Christian living. In this regard, he embraces a new existence, thereby becoming a new person. At the same time, it is genuinely his own self which emerges – that is, his existence as a single individual: therefore, his new life is also the manifestation of what

[556] Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite De' Più Eccellenti Architetti, Pittori, et Scultori Italiani, Da Cimabue Insino a' Tempi Nostri* (Firenze: Lorenzo Torrentino, 1550), p. 32.
[557] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, p. 13.

is more original to him. In the previous sections I discussed how indirect and direct communication produces two sorts of ironic effects: the first dissolves Christendom's illusion of having achieved Christianity, while the second upbuilds someone who has escaped this illusion, thereby strengthening his new pretense. This dynamic also allows the individualities submerged within the crowd to emerge, and subsequently roots them further in their own newly-found singularity.

A further question concerning this last point is why Kierkegaard specifies that the single individual is to be religiously understood. Kierkegaard adds to this matter that 'there is in a *religious sense* no public but only individuals, because the religious is earnestness, and earnestness is: the single individual; yet every human being, unconditionally every human being, which one indeed is, can be, yes, should be – the single individual.' [558] What Kierkegaard seems to be saying, is that when one looks to people in a religious way, one sees through the homogeneous amalgam of grey figures realizing this as a deception. As we may recall, in *Two Ages* Kierkegaard calls the social and spiritual unity typical of the present age a negative one.[559] We could now say: religiously – *coram Deo*, as it were – the public does not exist, and all that the religious eye sees is individualities in their singular existence. These individualities naturally express themselves in their relationships and always exist as members of a community,[560] but the religious call is always directed to someone in particular: 'if the crowd is evil, if it is chaos that threatens, there is rescue in one thing only, in becoming the single individual, in the residual thought: that single individual.'[561] Salvation for the single individual is precisely to become the single individual, or to become oneself.

If one is shaken out of the crowd by irony, this means that realizing one's failure to achieve the true ideal of human living, is what eventually allows the single individual to stand out from the public. At the same time, the individualizing effects of the ideal are far from being purely negative. As Kierkegaard writes, 'when the infinite requirement is heard and affirmed, is heard and affirmed

[558] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 10. Emphasis in the original text

[559] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, p. 13.

[560] Specifically, Christians belong to the Church, which according to the Augsburg confession is defined as "the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administrated." Kierkegaard quotes approvingly and discusses this passage from the Augsburg confession in his Journals. Kierkegaard, Søren, *Journals and Papers*, translated and edited by H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 600.

[561] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 69.

in all its infinitude, then *grace* is offered, or grace offers itself, to which the single individual, each one individually, can then have recourse as I do.' [562] Thus, the light shone on the single individual shakes the latter out of the public in two different ways. First, we have a negative and disrupting effect, given by the infinite requirement cast by the ideal. In this sense, the ideal presents itself as something that must be accomplished, and as having an infinite quality, being incommensurable and superior to everything finite. Christ's ironic effect is to cause *aporia* by attacking two misunderstandings of his figure. One is shaken out of the public insofar as it realizes the necessity to achieve this ideal. As we shall see below when discussing the "imitation of Christ motif," this is far from being an obvious point: that is, the Christian Danes of Kierkegaard's time considered Christ as the purest example of human living, and yet failed to think of his life as an object of imitation. Second, any attempt to trivialize the nature of Christ is rejected: he is not simply an ethical teacher with a moral message to share, and his infinity requires that anyone who wants to follow him in earnestness casts everything else aside.[563] At the same time, the single individual is offered grace. To understand what Kierkegaard might mean by grace in this context, we can think of Matthew 11:28-29, analyzed in *Practice of Christianity*: 'come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.' Remembering that he who speaks here is the ideal, we can read him as offering consolation to those made weary and burdened by his own manifestation. In other words, the ideal which discloses the gap between who we are and who we ought to be, possesses at the same time the gentleness to give us the means to find rest in him. As we shall see below, accepting this restful grace is what sets the single individual on the path of becoming more Christlike. Hence, negatively the single individual stands out – or rather, is made to stand out – of the public as he is stung by the ideal through irony. Positively, he does so as he embraces the grace offered by the ideal and undergoes a transformation that brings him to form a new – as it were un-public – pretense.

Hence, the single individual emerges as a result of a dialectic between the manifestation of sin-consciousness and the offering of grace. This underlines a crucial aspect of Kierkegaard's discourse, that is, that his discussion of the single individual is made 'not in sense of haughtiness

[562] Ibid., p. 16.

[563] In this respect, we can recall Kierkegaard's distinction between the ethical and the religious sphere. To claim Christ's belonging to the latter is to resist any Kantian interpretation of his figure as the teacher of universal and heteronomous morality.

but of humbleness.'[564] The single individual does not stand out of the public as the superman does over thoughtless weaklings. Rather, the single individual stands out of the public by acknowledging an unconditional and unconditioned ideal over and above himself, to which he owes allegiance. As a result of this, says Kierkegaard, the single individual comes to desire a consciousness – that is, a spirituality.[565] By relating one's consciousness to God one enters a state of 'sobriety'[566] insofar as one now sees oneself as nothing and as a sinner before God, beyond any humanistic illusion. At the same time the offering of grace is made. Subsequently, the single individual takes upon himself the duty to accept the grace offered and 'to work out [his] salvation with fear and trembling.' (Philippians 2:11-13) Therefore, the single individual stands out by recognizing the inappropriateness of haughtiness – for in his humiliation there is nothing to be haughty about – and by humbling himself under the ideal and the duty to achieve it. Here we can see how Kierkegaard appropriates the mysticism and the theology of discipleship which comes to him from Tauler and Eckhart via Arndt and the Pietist movement. Arguing that being created *ex nihilo* all creatures are nothing, Tauler thinks that our true vocation is that of – with absolute humbleness – giving up our creaturely nothingness to enter the fullness of divine existence. Analogously, writes Barnett, 'for Arndt and his mystical sources, if one realizes that one "is nothing," a mere "shadow" … whose consolation does not lie in creatures but in God alone, then one will follow the example of Christ, giving oneself over to God's will and so living a life of humility and charity.'[567] In this sense, the notion of single individual clearly does not have anything to do with humanistic titanism. Rather, it connects with the need to cast aside one's own illusion and to take up the duty – and before that the graceful possibility – of truly becoming human and living a philosophical existence.

We can see how this is an ironic dynamic: the shock of disruption is motivated by an ethical passion. This is ignited by the desire to empower others to transcend themselves and realize the fullness of life. Accordingly, the ironist becomes a catalyst for the ironic action of the ideal. As we have seen in the previous sections, neither Kierkegaard nor any other religious poet is fully the author of his own poetry. More specifically, we can now say that religious poetry is the

[564] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 157.
[565] Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination, Judge for Yourself!*, ed. and trans. By H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 68.
[566] Ibid., p. 104.
[567] Kierkegaard was in possession of multiple editions of Arndt's *True Christianity*, a religious best-seller in the 18th and the 19th century. Barnett, *Kierkegaard*, p. 82.

proclamation and celebration of the ideal's – that is, Christ's – excellence with respect to any single individual and at the same time of the graceful gesture made by the former to the latter. In Kierkegaard's own words, '*the single individual*, must personally relate himself to the unconditional. This is what I do to the best of my ability and with maximum effort and much sacrifice have fought for, fighting every tyranny, also the tyranny of the numerical.'[568] Once again, what sets apart the individual is the relationship to the unconditional – that is, the infinite. As we already know, when the single individual finds him submerged by the public, this causes him to be cut off from the capacity of exercising the 'crucial either/or.' Subsequently, he is rendered unable to relate to the unconditional, ending up living only on the finite level. In this situation, the relationship with the unconditional established as an outcome of the ironic event pierce through the public shifting the single individuals to a different existence. The duty of the religious poet is to introduce the single individual to this sort of relationship.[569]

The capacity to relate oneself personally to the unconditional is a manifestation of what Kierkegaard calls the 'courage to believe existentially in the ideal [that is], striving to actualize ourselves the form of life a manifested by Christ.'[570] The disruptive potential of irony opens up the possibility for this courage, thereby setting the stage for the single individual's entry into faith thanks to Christ's offering of grace, which is then followed by – as we will discuss in a few pages – imitation of his character. Of course, the answer to irony can always be refusal, cowardice, or fall into self-delusion. To choose one of these reactions causes the category of the single individual to be forgotten: therefore, 'Christianity is abolished. Then the individual will relate himself to God

[568] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 20.

[569] Kierkegaard stresses even further this point in another passage from the *The Point of View*, also restating this age's need for the category of the single individual: 'the single individual is the category through which, in a religious sense, the age, history, the human race must go. And the one who stood at Thermopylae was not so secure as I, who have stood, in order to bring about awareness of it, at this narrow pass, *the single individual*. His particular task was to keep the hordes from pressing through the narrow pass; if they proceed through, he would have lost. My task at least exposes me far less to the danger of being trampled down, since it was a lowly servant (but, as I have said from the beginning and repeat again and again, *without authority*) to prompt, if possible, to invite, to induce the many to press through this narrow pass, *the single individual*, through which, please note, no one presses except by becoming the single individual; the opposite is indeed a categorical impossibility.' Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, 118. Moreover, we have seen how Kierkegaard distinguishes the religious poet from the secular poet insofar as the former relates to the ideal which he proclaims as a duty to be achieved. This is reinstated with respect to the category of the single individual, as we find Kierkegaard claiming about himself that 'the author's life has indeed fairly accurately expressed what was ethically accentuated: to be the single individual; he has associated with countless people, but he has always stood alone, in his striving also striving to be allowed to stand alone, while in the surrounding world almost everything was the setting up, down and aside of committees.' Ibid., p. 120.

[570] Ibid., pp. 205-6.

through the human race, through an abstraction, through a third party – and then Christianity is *eo ipso* abolished. If this happens, then the God-man is a phantom instead of an actual prototype.'[571] In other words, when kept at bay by any reaction to irony different from the sequence of courage, faith, and imitation, the ideal becomes abstract and effectively vanishes from the individual's horizon of experience.

According to Antony Aumann, Kierkegaard sees this process of refusal as caused by a ruling social conformism. However, one must also keep in mind the already-mentioned effect of sin. While this does not invalidate Aumann's analysis, it must be considered that the choice between refusal and faith is not made in a vacuum. In this respect, we could say that the choice for faith can be made under the effect of irony. Here the awakening of sin-consciousness and its disruptive effect on one's pretense creates a state of suspension within which grace is offered and can be accepted. Otherwise, the choice in favor of social conformism is simply made on the ground of a sinful and inescapable belief that social conformism is consistent with the full achievement of humanity.

By what we have discussed so far, it starts to become evident why Kierkegaard thinks that the single individual can be the only bulwark against the public. By actually and personally relating to the unconditional ideal, the single individual becomes aware of dimensions of existence such as sin and grace. By relating to the unconditional, the single individual begins to partake in this unconditionality. Accordingly, insofar as the public belongs and is restricted to the level of finitude and conditionality, the single individual starts to operate and exist on a different level from it – while of course maintaining a physical connection to the same state of existence.

Having established the nature and importance of the category of the single individual within the economy of Kierkegaard's thought, we are now in the position to analyze how Kierkegaard's writing facilitates the transformation from massified person to single individual. This is crucial insofar as this process of transformation is precisely what Kierkegaard thinks has been abolished by a coalition between an overly scholarly attitude to Christianity and the flatness of massified life.[572]

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[571] Kierkegaard, 'Selected entries pertaining to *On My Work as an Author* and *The Point of View for my Work as an Author*,' dating 1849, in Ibid., pp. 205-6.

[572] About this, Kierkegaard writes:

'every decisive qualification in being a Christian is according to a dialectic or is on the other side of a dialectic. The confusion is that, with the help of the scientific-scholarly annulment of the dialectical element, this has been

3.2 The teacher, the savior

In the *Philosophical Fragments* Christ emerges as the teacher who provides the 'occasion' for his students to become aware of their sinful condition.[573] In this sense, Jesus is the divine ironist who brings to light the illusions of those who have a relationship with him.

Let us remember how in his dissertation Kierkegaard identified 'rejoinder' and 'situation' as the two main components of Socratic irony: in this case, the situation is provided by the meeting with Christ, the rejoinders are his life and teachings. At the same time, Christ is also described as the savior who can receive the sinner and mend sin.[574] Moreover, using a terminology borrowed from Johann Arndt's *True Christianity*, Jesus Christ is both *Vorbild* and *Heiland*, pattern and savior-redeemer.[575] Accordingly, Jesus not only exercises irony, but also allows the ironized person to move out of *aporia*. At the same time, he is the ideal towards which human beings should strive. Both poles are necessary and, as David J. Gouwens put it, they stand in a dialectical relationship: 'Without atonement, the Pattern is simply an external demand or "law," leading either to "works righteousness" or despair. Without the Pattern or prototype, Christian existence is "free from works," or else is indistinguishable from worldly life.'[576]

Kierkegaard is addressing here the classic Lutheran topic of the "triangular relationship" between salvation, works, and grace. As I shall flesh out below, Kierkegaard explicitly attacked the Danish church for having misrepresented Luther's emphasis on grace. Luther's theology of grace denies that works contribute in any way to salvation; nonetheless, works and imitation of Christ should follow salvation as the saved one's character is reformed and sanctified. In other

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completely forgotten … by unceremoniously permitting the dialectical element to be annulled this way in existence, the existence of the single individual, all the navigation marks, if I may use the expression, with regard to being a Christian have been abolished. It is possible that the present Christendom is the most perfect form of Christianity that has ever been seen; it is also possible that it is thoroughgoing worldliness.' qualification in being a Christian is according to a dialectic or is on the other side of a dialectic. The confusion is that, with the help of the scientific-scholarly annulment of the dialectical element, this has been completely forgotten … by unceremoniously permitting the dialectical element to be annulled this way in existence, the existence of the single individual, all the navigation marks, if I may use the expression, with regard to being a Christian have been abolished. It is possible that the present Christendom is the most perfect form of Christianity that has ever been seen; it is also possible that it is thoroughgoing worldliness.' Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 130.

[573] David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as a Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 126.

[574] Ibid., p. 126.

[575] Quoted in Christopher B. Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism and Holiness* (London: Ashgate, 2011), p. 81. According to George Pattison 'the Danish term *Forbillede* [pattern] contains within itself the notion of an *image* … for Kierkegaard, therefore, it is natural to talk of Christ as "pattern" to comprise the idea of Christ as "image," so that to speak of Christ as "pattern" leads on to speaking of Christ as the image of God restored to a fallen humanity,' Pattison, *Kierkegaard, the Aesthetic and the Religious*, p. 175.

[576] Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as a Religious Thinker*, p. 128.

words, they are the fruits of salvation. Kierkegaard believed that this aspect of Luther's thought naturally implies a certain restlessness which is never taken away by grace. By passing over the restlessness caused by salvation and grace, the Danish Lutheran divines such as Martensen had turned Luther's theology into a Philistine and Bourgeois version of Christianity. Therefore, Kierkegaard understood himself and his work as a denial of the Lutherans, not of Luther himself, and as a deepening of the latter's emphasis on grace. While Kierkegaard maintains that salvation comes from grace, this does not eliminate the fact that grace remains inescapably connected with works and a lifelong striving in the effort of edifying one's character.

As much as the dynamic between sin, salvation, and works is already somewhat made explicit in *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard gives a further treatment of the subject in *Practice in Christianity*, in a way which is functional to his treatment of the *Imitatio Christi*.[577] Specifically, the problem that Kierkegaard is addressing in *Practice in Christianity* is not so much establishing that Jesus Christ represents what humanity should look like and that be must be imitated in his behavior and character, since this premise would have been shared by his contemporaries as a matter of course. Rather, the problem is to clarify what aspect of Jesus' life manifests this ideality. In particular, the question is whether ideality is registered in Christ's life on earth – that is, in his *abasement* – or if instead it is to be found in his glorification after his ascension to heaven – that is, in his *loftiness*. As we shall see, Kierkegaard's answer is that it is necessary to keep the two views together. Furthermore, Kierkegaard's polemics revolves around whether Christ should be "merely" worshipped or rather if Christians have a duty to imitate him and his style of life. Kierkegaard labels observers those "Christians" who pursue the first alternative, and as imitators those who embrace the latter.

The difference between these two approaches to Christ-relatedness also amounts to the difference between the "true" and the "false" life. In this respect, we can listen to Julia Watkin's interpretation of Kierkegaard's *dictum* – from the Gilleleie Journal entry of 1835 – that truth is nothing but living for an idea.[578] Hence, to embrace and imitate Jesus' life of abasement is true life if compared to the simple worship of his ascended figure. This follows insofar as to be an imitator

[577] The idea of seeing Christ's life as the pattern to be replicated in one's existence is rooted in the Biblical text (see for instance 1 Peter 2:20-1) and in the tradition of Christian theology. My reflections concerning this aspect of Kierkegaard's work are mainly inspired by Christopher B. Barnett *Kierkegaard, Pietism and Holiness*. For a history of the concept and of the "filiation" leading up to Kierkegaard, see Christopher B. Barnett, *Kierkegaard,* pp. 65ff.
[578] Kierkegaard, *Journals*, quoted in Julia Watkins, *Kierkegaard* (London: Continuum, 1997), p. 16.

is to exist in a certain manner, which shall likely be costly and imply heavy consequences. In George Pattison's words, 'Christ's paradoxical combining of a life lived "as nothing" with having "the attention of all" fixed on him must provoke hostility and rejection;' thus, to be an imitator is 'to be as nothing in the way that Christ exists as nothing' and this means being 'on a collision course with the human establishment. To serve only one master is to be on the way that becomes the way of the cross.'[579] In turn, to be an admirer does not engage oneself existentially and it is not a choice which translates to any sort of commitment toward embracing and achieving a particular ideal. Julia Watkin remarks that there are two approaches to a particular world-view: 'the intellectual approach to the intellectual content of the view, and the view, and the question of how one should exist or live in relation to it.'[580] In this respect, the admirer has a relationship to the ideal which is just intellectual, whereas the imitator lets the question of the form-of-life interrogate him and change his way of life.

With respect to this question, Kierkegaard's main polemical target is Bishop J. P. Mynster. At the time of the publication of *Practice in Christianity* in 1850, Mynster was serving as Bishop of Zealand and as the primate of the Danish Lutheran Church. Just like Nietzsche found in David Strauss the archetype of the German Cultural Philistine, so Kierkegaard identified Mynster with that Christianity which had deified the established order – that is, the illusion of Christendom – and according to which conflict between religion and culture was unthinkable, the two being rather interchangeable. Such a form of Christianity glorifies harmony, stability, and therefore focuses on worship and the adoring observation of the ascended Jesus. It would be mistaken to think that Kierkegaard criticizes these values as such: rather, he believes they must be corrected through and held together with the mandate of imitating Christ in his abasement and by embracing the counter-cultural nature of his teachings. In this way, the ascended Christ becomes the polar star and hope of the imitator, while to relate oneself to him in isolation from the sphere of imitation causes one to become a mere observer.

In order to see how Kierkegaard develops his position, we can start with his criticism of the established church concerning this topic. In his journal of 1849 he writes that

[579] Pattison, *Kierkegaard, the Aesthetic and the Religious*, p. 177.
[580] Ibid., p. 24.

'Christianity has of course known very well what it wanted. It wants to be proclaimed by witnesses – that is, by persons who proclaim the teaching and also existentially express it. The modern notion of a pastor as it is now is a complete misunderstanding. Since pastors also presumably should express the essentially Christian, they have quite rightly discovered how to relax the requirement, abolish the ideal.'[581]

Hence, Kierkegaard accuses the pastors of the Church of Denmark of having as it were lowered the bar of ideality – that is, of what it means to live a full human life – in order to have it easy.[582] Bearing in mind that Mynster is Kierkegaard's primary target, we can read in this passage an anticipation of Kierkegaard's (in)famous "attack upon Christendom," that is, the series of scathing public attacks focused on Bishop Martensen, Kierkegaard's long-time rival and now successor to the late bishop Mynster. In the sermon delivered on the occasion of Mynster's funeral, Martensen called Mynster a true witness to the Christian faith,[583] and this provoked Kierkegaard's polemical outburst. However, we can see how he pointed the finger against Mynster's impostorship already in *Practice of Christianity*. Bishop Mynster, being the first in importance among the Danish clergy, is called out as a false witness and falsifier of the Christian faith.

Moreover, Kierkegaard intensifies his accusations by arguing that the pastors' attitude seems to co-operate with a tendency generally present among human beings, Danish or otherwise: 'everyone has a natural, congenital inclination to disobedience. Leniency was therefore substituted for rigorousness; because one did not dare to command and one shrank from having to command.'[584] People generally speaking do not like to live a rigorously regulated lifestyle – not even when this is attached to the promise of living the fullness of life.[585] At the same time, the preachers – once again, we can think here of Mynster in particular – both dislike to give command

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[581] Kierkegaard, 'Selected Entries pertaining to Practice in Christianity,' in *Practice in Christianity*, p. 288.

[582] So Kierkegaard in *For Self-Examination*: 'No, what stands between Christianity and people in these sensible times is that they have lost the conception of the unconditioned requirement, that they cannot get it into their heads why the requirement is the unconditioned (of what use is it, since no one, after all, fulfills it), that the unconditioned has become for them the impractical, a foolishness, a ridiculousness, so that they, mutinously or conceitedly, reverse the relation, seek the fault in the requirement and themselves become the claimants who demand that the requirement be changed. Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, pp. 156-7.

[583] See Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[584] Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, p. 227.

[585] Of course, being a Lutheran Kierkegaard did not believe that rigorousness or works is the causes of salvation. Rather, from faith in salvation must follow as a matter of obedience towards God a life of rigorousness, of sacrifice to one's own appetites for the sake of being able to better love God and one's neighbor.

and to take that same rigorousness upon themselves as they ought to do if they had to preach proper Christianity. Since the style of communication of the religious witness requires a degree of personal absorption and actualization of what is communicated, for mutual convenience ideality has been downgraded and impoverished. In this way, it is easier to fool oneself that fullness has been achieved. Furthermore, Kierkegaard seems to imply that the people representing the Danish church are acting in this way deliberately and not just by lazyness or misunderstanding. The whole of this process "sinks" the Gospel insofar as 'the demonstration of Christianity really lies in imitation.'[586] Accordingly, Christianity is not appropriately either embodied or communicated: the result of this is the abolishment of Christianity and the rise of Christendom.

We can register here a crucial difference between Kierkegaard's and Lear's account of the non-ironic situation. This is difference is made by the presence of sin and what with Kant we could call a "tendency towards radical evil," which nurtures humanity's worst instinct as well as a voluntary commitment to stay in a non-ironic condition and to cause others to do the same. While Lear and Nietzsche are no strangers to the idea of wilfully deceiving oneself and one's neighbour, they do not seem to think that such tendency is as pervasive or as damaging in human beings. In Lear it seems that one can always resort to irony, be it enacted by oneself or by some other ironist – in particular, by a psychoanalyst. In Nietzsche, one may go through Zarathustra's proclamation of a new humanity but nothing seems to be barring him from taking the step unaided. Against the two of them, Kierkegaard holds that the only ironist who can save us from a false pretense is Christ. Through *Practice in Christianity*, he also claims that we should not even recklessly trust those who speak in Christ's name. People stand for Christ only insofar as they witness to him. If they do otherwise, whether in good faith or by a malicious design, they are just acting as a stumbling block. In this regard, they are like the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees who in Matthew 23:13 are said to have 'shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces,' so that they themselves did not enter, nor are willing to let other people try.

As discussed in previous sections, when Kierkegaard talks of the 'ideal' with reference to human life he is talking about the figure of Christ. Thus, it is this figure which has been lessened, through a perspective inversion, in order to make it easier for the diminishers to match his attributes and his way of life:

[586] Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, p. 68.

'it is above all a matter of being careful that you, if I dare say so, do not by way of an illusion get the design of his, the prototype's, life turned around wrong. If you had lived contemporary with him, then you naturally would have begun, like him, in lowliness and abasement. But since he is now on high and wants to draw you to himself, you who are to begin – through an optical illusion it can so easily seem as if you should begin with loftiness, which he certainly did not do, for he, the one who has finished, ended with loftiness.'[587]

Paradoxically, the lessening of the ideal happens when the focus is mistakenly put where the status of the ideal as such is fully demonstrated. By focusing on Jesus' condition after he has ascended to heaven, Christians obtain the illusion that to imitate him means reproducing such divine loftiness. What in fact happens, is that the inhabitants of Christendom – far from moving towards something reminiscent of the *theosis* of the Greek fathers – come to a spiritual dead-end. By focusing on the end of Jesus's story they miss out on the path that led to the ascension. This was indeed Jesus' time in abasement as the necessary prelude to his ascension and loftiness.[588]

Here, we have to keep in mind that what Kierkegaard is discussing is the possibility of imitating God himself. If we aim to his loftiness, then there is no chance of imitating him: from an orthodox Christian perspective, Jesus is not simply an exceptional human being; inasmuch as he is God, he stands way above the capabilities of human beings.

With respect to this "optical problem," on whether the would-be imitator of Christ should focus on either his abasement or his loftiness, Kierkegaard draws the distinction between the admirers and the imitators of Christ. In this respect he writes:

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[587] Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, p. 184.

[588] As an aside, we can comment on the biographical context underlining *Practice in Christianity*. Around this time, Kierkegaard struggled with the decision of publishing this book under a pseudonym or not. This situation was caused by the fact that he was running out of the allowance received through his rich inheritance and considering seeking employment with the Danish church. For obvious reasons, he was afraid that publishing under his name a work so critical of the Danish religious establishment would have sunk his chances of getting a job. Moreover, having this book being conceived in 1848 – as by Kierkegaard's own remark – the wounds left by the "Corsair affair" were arguably still fresh. In this sense, I do not mean that we should reduce Kierkegaard's take on the topic of the Imitatio Christi by gesturing to his personal travails. Rather, I believe it is relevant to the understanding of his thought that his arguments are the fruit of both the "logic of the mind" and of that of the "heart." In this specific case, the elaboration of the Christian dogmas is intertwined and propelled by Kierkegaard's own "deposit of living experience." His emotional life integrates and augment his mental life and vice-versa, in such a way that even trans-personal feelings become what propels his efforts to transpersonal communication. This way, Kierkegaard makes the case for the deifying function of a certain sort of pain, thereby attempting to reaching out to those who may have made experiences similar to him, or who may be enticed into embracing a life of abasement with the purpose of imitating Christ.

'If Christ exists for us only in loftiness, if his abasement is forgotten or if he had never existed in lowliness, then in that case not even Christ himself, in order to be self-consistent, could require anything but admirers, adoring admirers, since loftiness and admirer, divine loftiness and adoring admirer, correspond perfectly to each other. In relation to loftiness, on our part it would even be effrontery, arrogance, blind infatuation, more or less madness, to want to be imitators rather than decorously to decline to aspire to what perhaps is not allotted to us, because it is allotted to someone else, and decorously to be satisfied to admire and adoring to admire. But the correlative of abasement and lowliness is: imitators.'[589]

When we look at Jesus in his loftiness, all we can do is to admire him. As Kierkegaard writes approaching directly Jesus Christ in prayer,

'Lord Jesus Christ you did not come to the world to be served and thus not to be admired either, or in that sense worshiped. You yourself were the way and the life – and you have asked only for imitators. If we have dozed off into this infatuation, wake us up, rescue us from this error of wanting to admire or adoringly admire you instead of wanting to follow you and be like you.'[590]

Hence, not only is there a sharp difference between being an admirer and an imitator of Jesus, but according to Kierkegaard the admirer is a sort of disciple that Jesus never sought to have. Theirs is the cheap Christianity that does not see how 'the Christian is required to both act and transform.'[591]

Thus, the matter of the imitation of Christ has to do with his life in abasement, or with his suffering. More specifically, Kierkegaard argues, to imitate him is to suffer like he did, thereby effecting our contemporaneity with Jesus.[592] However, this does not mean forgetting or removing his loftiness. Rather, as long as it is clear that loftiness does not come in with respect to the practice of imitating Jesus, it is a question of understanding the place of loftiness. In this respect, commenting a passage from John's Gospel – 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw

[589] Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, p. 237.
[590] Ibid., p. 223.
[591] Joshua Cockayne, 'Imitation and Contemporaneity: Kierkegaard and the Imitation of Christ,' in *Heythrop Journal*, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.12786, 3. Kaftansky writes: 'Admirers are pseudo-students who only follow their teacher half way, to the point where the teaching turns out to be difficult or perplexing. Unless the teacher conforms to the expectations of their admirers, the initial openness rapidly changes into hostility, and the teacher becomes, first a persona non grata and then a scapegoat for the admirers. Genuine imitation requires martyrdom, which does not necessarily mean physical death, but may mean withdrawing from the world and being exposed to various types of criticism and ridicule.' Kaftansky, 'Socratic Dimension of Kierkegaard's Imitation,' pp. 9-10.
[592] Pattison, *Kierkegaard, Religion, and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Culture*, p. 195.

all to myself' (John 12:32) – Kierkegaard writes that people are drawn to Jesus from his place in loftiness, that is, from on high.[593] The main reason why he does so, is to make those he draws remember about his life on earth and abasement.[594] Hence, concludes Kierkegaard, 'he has not in loftiness forgotten you – and you do not forget his abasement; you love him in his abasement, but also his glorious revelation.'[595] Therefore, the ascended Jesus draws the believers to himself and they have to love him both in his loftiness and in his abasement.[596]

In loftiness he draws the believers, and therefore he is also the eternal teacher to whom all are always contemporaries. Because of this, it is always possible to form a personal relationship with Jesus. In this sense, it is correct to say with Joshua Cockayne that 'it is in approaching Christ as a contemporary, that a person is able to avoid the error of relating only to Christ in historicity at a distance and thereby only admire him.'[597] However, we should not make the mistake of reading the question of historicity against contemporaneity as that of abasement against loftiness. Rather, historicity and contemporaneity are two different ways of relating to loftiness. Since Jesus' abasement took place centuries ago, this cannot be experienced in contemporaneity: we only have access to it as an historical fact. However, since Jesus is living in loftiness *now*, we can have a relationship of contemporaneity to him. Thereby, we can relate indirectly to his abasement by holding fast to his loftiness and imitating his abasement through our own. Thus, through the loftiness we are linked to the abasement. We could say, then, that the difference between historicity and contemporaneity with respect to Christ's loftiness is the same as that between subjectively apprehending a concept or not doing so. As we have previously discussed in our treatment of

[593] Ibid., p. 154.
[594] Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, p. 154.
[595] Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, p. 154.
[596] Specifically, Kierkegaard imagines himself addressing a group of believers congregating for the sacrament of communion – this passage comes from a section of *Practice of Christianity* collecting texts meant to be delivered as speeches during Friday communion. Moreover, the liturgical context is tied even more closely to the theological analysis by the fact that the church where Kierkegaard meant to deliver these discourses was the famous Vor Frue Kirke in Copenhagen. This church sports a majestic statue portraying a massive figure of Jesus stretching his arms out and ideally proclaiming the words of John 12:32 – the words themselves being carved on the statue's pedestal. Of course, we could say that as far as this falls within the field of Christian systematic theology, Kierkegaard's point can be discussed as detached by its original liturgical and physical context – Kierkegaard himself is de facto allowing this by publishing on paper the discourse, hence detaching it by any physical and liturgical act. Nonetheless, this testifies once more to the materiality and existential import of Kierkegaard's argument, its rootedness in his life-experience. Moreover, it shows how much he understands Jesus' action and presence as actually efficient in the corporate life of the Church and with respect to the life of every believer – in this specific case, as each member of the congregation steps forward to take communion. This underlines the immediacy, with respect to one's existence, of the possibility of having a living relationship with Jesus, and thereby of the possibility and calling to imitate him.
[597] Joshua Cockayne, 'Imitation and Contemporaneity,' p. 8.

transference, Lear calls "subjectivation" the therapeutic appropriation of a concept. When we are contemporary to Christ in his loftiness, it follows that his loftiness and through this his abasement progressively become part of us, gradually shaping our behaviors, opinions, and existences at large. Quite correctly, I believe, Cockayne connects this dynamic to Kierkegaard's Lutheran belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Just like in the Sacrament of bread and wine, 'Christ is not a historical person whom we need to imagine, but rather, a living person who is supernaturally present to his believers through his presence.'[598]

In turn, since communion with Christ implies that whoever believes in him has to do the works that he did (John 14:12), the way to know his works is to look to and imitate his life in abasement. Hence, while the imitator of Jesus must focus on his abasement, this does not cancel the necessity of holding in the same view his status in loftiness. In fact, Kierkegaard claims that 'The true Christian's abasement is not sheer abasement; it is only a depiction of loftiness, but a depiction in this world, where loftiness must appear inversely as lowliness and abasement […] Consequently in a certain sense the abasement is loftiness. As soon as you take away the world, that muddy element that confuses with its depiction, as soon as the Christian dies, he is on high, where he already was before, but which could not be seen here by the world.'[599] Hence, the incarnation of Jesus in human flesh is in a way just a different appearance of post-ascension loftiness. While in this world, the Son can only be in abasement and appear as an abased individual.

3.3 Who is the Imitator?

Having seen the way in which Kierkegaard presents Jesus as an "object of imitation," let us now conclude this chapter by exploring the character of the imitator. To begin with, we have to deal with a preliminary question: to what extent is the figure of Jesus imitable? We have seen how Kierkegaard argues that what is to be imitated is Jesus' behavior in abasement, namely, his human life. In this sense, he appears to be "commensurate" to human means; however, one could argue that according to the Christian faith Jesus was a human of a very uncommon kind. While the council of Chalcedon teaches that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, the Christian

[598] Cockayne, 'Imitation and Contemporaneity,' p. 9. See also note 41.
[599] Ibid., p. 198.

tradition has also held him to be born sinless and to have led a perfect life. One then could wonder just to what extent his life can be imitated by a regular human being.[600]

In order to address this question, we can go back to a previously-mentioned passage from *The Point of View*: 'When the infinite requirement is heard and affirmed, is heard and affirmed in all its infinitude, then grace is offered, or grace offers itself, to which the single individual, each one individually, can then have recourse as I do.'[601] So, on one hand we have the requirement, or the ideal of full humanity as expressed in Jesus and his perfect obedience to God. This must be affirmed in all its strength, and we have seen how Kierkegaard chastises the pastors of his day for having "diminished" the stringency of the requirement. However, on the other hand – and this is the work of Christ in his loftiness – grace is offered: an invitation and a pardon is extended by the requirement himself.[602] Among other things, this nexus crucially connect with Kierkegaard's partial refusal of the so-called "ascetic tradition." While he appreciates the ascetic's emphasis on conduct and practice, Kierkegaard sees in this figure an underdeveloped theology of grace.[603] At the same time, he condemns the Danish Lutherans for having misread Luther's stress on grace and faith, criticizing them for having twisted the reformer's revolt against work-salvation into a refusal of Christian imitation.[604] We misunderstand the properly Lutheran vision of faith if we take faith

[600] Barnett, *Kierkegaard*, p. 180.
[601] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 16.
[602] Once again, we can resort to Kierkegaard's words in *For Self-Examination* in order to clarify this point: 'Help us all, each one of us, you who both will and can, you who are both the prototype and the Redeemer, and in turn both the Redeemer and the prototype, so that when the striving one droops under the prototype, crushed, almost despairing, the Redeemer raises him up again; but at the same moment you are again the prototype so that he may be kept in the striving.' Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, p. 148.
[603] Cockayne, 'Imitation and Contemporaneity,' p. 6. In this respect, Antony Aumann underlines how Kierkegaard is not to be read as a Pelagian thinker: while he gives great importance to spiritual and moral striving, Aumann stresses how 'the point of pursuing the outrageously strenuous standard that Kierkegaard sets for becoming a Christian is to impress upon the readers their inadequacies as human beings … how infinitely short they fall of the Christian ideal' in order to encourage them 'to turn to God and rely on his grace.' Hence, Kierkegaard stress on commitment, witnessing and imitation can be fully understood only within the framework of the protestant and Lutheran theology which proclaims that divine grace is the only power truly able to transform human existence. In a quick oversight of Kierkegaard's works, Aumann notices how this theme is repeated in many places within Kierkegaard's production: 'Kierkegaard consistently rejects the idea that what matters spiritually speaking is within one's own power to attain. The core message of *Philosophical Fragments*, for instance, is that salvation does not come from within but from without and the *Postscript* contains a similar claim. Although Johannes Climacus is famous for declaring, "subjectivity is truth," he adds a few pages later that the more profound expression is "subjectivity is untruth." He also offers readers an extended meditation on how one is capable of nothing without God, an Augustinian theme that reappears throughout Kierkegaard's authorship. Finally, in *Sickness Unto Death*, one reads that the attempt to rely on oneself in the spiritual domain is a form of despair.' Antony Aumann, 'Kierkegaard and Asceticism,' *Existenz*, 13 (2018), pp. 39, 42.
[604] Ibid., p. 7.

to be but a 'restless thing'[605] – as Kierkegaard himself writes in *For Self-Examination*. The balance between action and grace is perhaps best described in another passage from the same text, 'Christianity's requirement is this: your life should express works as strenuously as possible; then one thing more is required-that you humble yourself and confess: but my being saved is nevertheless grace.'[606] Hence, Kierkegaard proclaims that the demands of a perfectionist ethics must exist together with the consciousness of one's own limitations and total reliance on grace. In the light of his deficiencies, is addressed to the believer: the grace and the "drawing" action of Christ.

The implications for those who endeavor to imitate Christ unfold in this co-habitation of an unachievable perfection – which is bound to awaken the consciousness of sin each time it is remembered and confronted – and the grace extended to those who realize their misgivings and desire to amend them. So we see how the pastors' diminishment of the requirement, while intended to be a relief for the believers, is actually damaging them: if one does not clash with the Pattern's perfection, then its need for grace is never realized.[607] However, this means that those who do not see their sin shall never become single individuals – they shall not become themselves. This means that Kierkegaard's ironic strategy has not only *aporetic* effects – that is, dispelling Christendom's illusions of having assurged to the state of Christ – but also *atopic* ones, insofar as it attacks and dislocates the official portrait of Christ in favor of a more truthful and unsettling, and thereby actually salvific vision of the Savior. This I think, is what is expressed by Wojciech T. Kaftansky when he writes that 'The true human being, that which Kierkegaard names the single individual, will emulate in his own person the model of the ideal self … Before the single individual will proceed with his imitative action, he or she has to gain knowledge of the imitative model, not mistaking it for a pseudo-ideal that has been re-created abstractly by thinkers and that represents qualities below the changeless standards established by God.'[608] Grace becomes actually available once the ideal is actually visible and, together with the experience of sin, signals the opening of an actual possibility to become more like Christ, so that 'the teacher who comes in love with the intent

[605] Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, p. 17.
[606] Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination*, p. 17. On this point, Kierkegaard could hardly be anymore Lutheran than this. Let us just mention that in the first and the fourth of the 95 theses Luther claimed that all the believer's life should be a penitence, that true penitence is disgust of oneself, and that this shall last until one enters the Kingdom. See Martin Luther, *Per la Riforma della Chiesa*, trans. Italo Pin (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2017), p. 12.
[607] Barnett, *Kierkegaard*, p. 189.
[608] Wojciech T. Kaftansky, "The Socratic Dimension of Kierkegaard's Imitation," in *Heythrop Journal*, 58 (2017), p. 8.

of atonement is the occasion, showing both sin and the way of salvation.'[609] In the despair of sin, the single individual can resort to grace: 'as the disciple learns to rely more and more on God's grace, so will he or she be moved to give up worldly pursuits and to do God's will alone.'[610] However, this approximation to the ideal does not happen because of something we do: rather, it is an effect of Jesus' action of drawing everyone towards him. In other words, it is because we let him draw us to him, and not because of our righteousness, that we become more Christlike. Hence, Kierkegaard writes that 'Christ … wants to help every human being to become a self, requires this of him first and foremost, requires that he, by repenting, become a self, in order then to draw him to himself. He wants to draw the human being to himself, but in order truly to draw him to himself he wants to draw him only as a free being to himself, that is, through a choice.'[611] Hence, the individual who finds himself sinful has the choice to repent for his sin. If he chooses repentance, then Jesus will draw the sinner to himself and transforms him in his likeness.

As this process requires that one 'starts from abasement,' to become more Christlike will involve a necessary dose of suffering. This is the unavoidable consequence of accepting divine grace. Accordingly, the would-be imitator must be willing to suffer just like Christ did. So, writes Kierkegaard,

'if you become contemporary with him in his abasement and this sight moves you to want to suffer with him, then there will be opportunity enough for you to be able to suffer in a way akin to his suffering … and even if the opportunity is not given, it is in any case not so much a question of opportunity as of the willingness to want to suffer in a way akin to his suffering.'[612]

However, this suffering is not to be considered a fruitless and painful interval between the acceptance of grace and the accomplished condition of communion with Christ. Just as the Son of God 'learned obedience from what he suffered' (Hebrews 5:8), so the path of the imitator is a schooling in obedience and Christlikeness. Accordingly, each imitator 'is given his task little by his suffering … and even if the opportunity is not given, it is in any case not so much a question of opportunity as of the willingness to want to suffer in a way akin to his suffering.'[613] Therefore, the imitator is introduced to trials, the difficulty of which increases according to his spiritual

[609] Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as a Religious Thinker*, p. 126.
[610] Barnett, *Kierkegaard*, p. 196.
[611] Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, p. 160.
[612] Ibid., p. 172.
[613] Ibid., p. 172.

maturity. Each time, this must be received as an occasion to repeat one's vow of obedience towards God. All these trials are steps within one single, life-long examination. In this sense, the whole life of the imitator is a test: this test is 'whether one will in truth be a Christian or not.'[614]

We must be careful with this passage, lest we understand that Kierkegaard is arguing that Jesus tortures those who want to imitate him in order to make them more like himself. Kierkegaard is keen to specify that Jesus 'is love and leniency itself'[615]: there is no shade of cruelty in Jesus, nor he is some sort of harsh taskmaster. Rather, says Kierkegaard, it is the character of the world that imposes this suffering on the imitators insofar as they are such. Therefore, paraphrasing Barnett the Christian life is a love of love that begets love:[616] the imitator's love for Christ generates love as the imitator conforms to Christ. However, once again, we can remember that from a Christian point of view loftiness translates into lowliness and abasement in this world. Still, is not that lowliness is love, but rather that lowliness and pain are imposed on love, insofar as living a life inspired by it is not well-received by the secular world.[617] As George Pattison put it 'the modern world, governed as it is by the law of levelling, a law fabricated out of envy and fear, creates a social situation in which violence is endemic. The "crowd," the archetypal concept of the modern world, is constantly in search of new victims to justify its failure.'[618]

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[614] Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, p. 186.

[615] Ibid., p. 196.

[616] Ibid., p. 198.

[617] Clearly, this assumes a certain interpretation of the world which distances Kierkegaard - or we should perhaps say the Christian tradition - from both Lear and Nietzsche. While he is certainly far from not acknowledging the dark corners of existence, it is also true that Lear does not thematize the world as such as a dangerous place. As we have discussed, he makes reference to Plato's cave-myth - a story which would seem to point to the illusory and untrue character of the world of pre-philosophical life. However, Lear psychologizes the "shadow," as a distortion which we project as we give shape to reality and which psychoanalysis needs to dispel – see the previous sections on Lear and therapeutic action. While there is nothing wrong with these assertions, the possibility that there may be an objective aspect of reality that causes this shadow to be is completely overseen. The shadow is always a result of subjective action - that is, the result of a psychological trauma - and there seems to be no reference to the possibility that our subjective illusions are generated because a more fundamental shadow engulfs our existences. In other words, there is no hint to the possibility that we may actually be living in a shadowy realm in more than a mythological sense, which in order to be understood is to be reduced to its psychological consequences. Nietzsche definitely frames the world "out there" under a more hostile light – for a taste of this we can read the scene of Zarathustra's first meeting with the crowd in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. However, under the reading I developed it would seem to be the case that Nietzsche would suggest re-interpreting such hostility in order to make this a source of strength and health. This is perhaps one conjugation of his "loyalty to earth." This means that after all Zarathustra is arguably more in continuity with the world he distances himself from than the single individual is under Kierkegaard's perspective, even though he – that is the single individual – would in any case be under the Christian assignment of proclaiming the good news to those still living in the crowd.

[618] Pattison, *Kierkegaard, the Aesthetics and the Religious*, p. 184.

Kierkegaard describes the existential dynamic between love and lowliness with a metaphor – which we can aptly employ to conclude this section: 'The star truly is high in the sky, is just as high in the sky although, seen in the sea, it seems to lie far under the earth. Likewise, to be a Christian is the highest elevation, even though in this world's depiction it must appear as the deepest abasement. Consequently in a certain sense the abasement is loftiness. As soon as you take away the world, that muddy element that confuses with its depiction, as soon as the Christian dies, he is on high, where he already was before, but which could not be seen here by the world.'[619]

In the light of this discussion of the interplay between abasement and loftiness, we can see how the practice of the *Imitatio Christi* does include the imitation of Christ's choice of hiding his divine nature. As noted by Mark L. McCreary, in *Practice of Christianity* Kierkegaard claims that while on earth Jesus stays "under cover." In other words, he made it impossible for others to directly recognize him as the God-man. Under this guise, Jesus could only communicate his deity indirectly. This was the only way he could find to help people come to true faith in him.[620] Hence, as McCreary put it, 'just as the Incarnation requires indirect communication and adopting an incognito [that which in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is the distinct mark of humor as the *confinium* of the religious life[621]], so also some individuals who love others will imitate Jesus by using indirect communication, adopting an incognito and deceiving others into the truth.'[622] This posture, which Kierkegaard calls 'mystification' in *The Point of View*, is precisely the stance of the pseudonymous authorship, and as I have previously discussed it can be found also in the religious communications, insofar as Kierkegaard avoids presenting himself as having

[619] Pattison, *Kierkegaard, the Aesthetics and the Religious*, p. 198. It is important to notice here how Kierkegaard makes use of the language of sight and visibility. Pattison comments on the notion of transparency in Kierkegaard coupling it with that of reflection: '"transparency" and "reflection" might seem at first to fit most easily into the framework of epistemology, as if we might be speaking of a subject that is transparent to or that reflects a determinate object outside itself. But talk of transparency is importantly qualified in Kierkegaard's writings not only by the fact that it coincides with the subject becoming as nothing, but also by the presupposition that the self that is to reflect the divine image is not merely a reflecting surface but reflects itself to itself and that this structure of self-reflection determines the whole range of conscious life. It is not just a matter of a reflected reflection but of a reflecting reflection. Consciousness is more than the mere reflection or impression on a receptor organ of an external stimulus: it is also the mind's taking cognizance of this reflection, i.e. it is the reflection of the reflection, or that the reflection re-reflected, that determines consciousness as consciousness;' George Pattison, *Kierkegaard's Upbuilding Discourses: Philosophy, Theology, Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 100.

[620] Mark L. McCreary, 'Kierkegaard on Mystification and Deceiving into the Truth,' *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 39 (2011), pp. 28-9.

[621] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 461.

[622] Ibid., p. 29.

religious authority or as being an extraordinary Christian.[623] Accordingly, under the present terms we can say that "mystifier" is another name for ironist. It must be noticed that in Kierkegaard's understanding, acquiring the posture of 'incognito' is far from easy. As he discusses in *Practice in Christianity*, incognito means pretending that one is something lowlier than one truly is. In other words, the true practice of incognito and irony is bound with the practice of self-denial. It follows that the Christian ironist imitates Christ in his self-abasement by refraining from showing what he essentially is.[624] It follows that in this sense, the deceiving is a practice of the highest religious value, and an essential feature of the shape taken by *Imitatio Christi* in Christendom. Of course, if this is true – that the Christian ironist gets his mantle in imitating Christ – it follows that Christ himself must be seen as an ironist, insofar as he is the master of incognito, of denying his own nature in order to allow his interlocutors to come to see the truth ironically, in a way that grabs them personally and existentially.

[623] McCreary, 'Kierkegaard on Mystification,' p. 29.
[624] Ibid., p. 31.

CONCLUSION

In this concluding section, I shall present a synthetic view of the content of this work. In this way I shall attempt to express my provisional findings concerning the practice of philosophy "as a way of life" in the post-Enlightenment setting.

In the first half of Chapter 1, I have summarized the history of the concept of irony with the goal of providing a background for my subsequent discussion of Lear, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. Specifically, I have described its emergence from the culture of ancient Greece and the way in which it was significantly shaped by the interpretation of Socrates as the paradigmatic ironist. In this respect, the Ancient Greek noun *eironeia* was originally employed as a rough equivalent of "feigning" and as a term of abuse. In this sense, the ironist – that is, he who practices *eironeia* – was someone who feigned with the goal of pursuing his malicious intents. Accordingly, in the Platonic dialogues Socrates is described as an ironist only by his opponents, who accuse him of feigning ignorance with the goal of disarming and overcoming them in the dialogic exchange. With Socrates' execution and subsequent rise to a state of quasi-sainthood, the capacity of practicing irony turned into a – potentially – positive quality thanks to its association with him. In this respect, feigning was now acknowledged as a tool which may be conducive to discovering the truth, insofar as – coupled with Socrates' questioning habit – it became the mark of the sincere pursuer of truth and a characterizing feature of Socrates as the philosopher *par excellence*.

Another significant element which contributed to the historical reception of the concept of irony, was the fixation of its definition by the hands of some of the major exponents of Greek-Latin rhetoric – that is, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Specifically, the ancient rhetoricians defined irony as "saying something while meaning the opposite" – accordingly, Socrates was understood as somebody who claimed his ignorance while in fact knowing a great deal. This definition survived the historical context within which it was formulated, and was accepted and received by all later thinkers. Moreover, this meant that, since the mainstream understanding of irony was elaborated within the discipline of rhetoric, this made this concept of little interest to the philosophical community. Ironically, irony was

closely associated with one of the fathers of Western philosophy, and yet it fell out of the theoretical interests of most within the philosophical community.

This situation was to change with the advent of Romanticism – in particular, thanks to its German branch. At this stage, irony became a concept worthy of philosophical relevance. At the same time, the Romantics – following the lead of Friedrich Schlegel – transformed irony from being a "simple" rhetorical technique into a way of life. As a consequence, the rhetorical skill of "saying one thing while meaning the opposite" was integrated into the metaphysics of the Romantics. The latter, in its most general outline, understands reality as a fragmented flux of finite and transient entities. The latter are distinct from but somehow connected to the Absolute, which can be grasped but neither exhausted nor fully manifested in and from within finite reality. In this regard, just like the rhetorical ironist is he who is able to keep together two opposites by feigning, so the philosophical ironist is he who can keep together the metaphysical opposite of the relative and the Absolute. This is done not only through the medium of thought, but also in the medium of reality and existence, as the Romantic ironist is supposedly able to express a thought and living form of the logical and metaphysical paradox generated by the conjunction of the relative with the Absolute. With this development in its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, the concept of irony became for the first time an integral part of a possible way of understanding 'philosophy as a way of life' – already as it were "this side" of the threshold constituted by the Enlightenment.

Although staunch critics of Romanticism, both Hegel and Kierkegaard elaborated their understandings of irony in conversation with the Romantics' development of this concept. On the one hand, Hegel sees irony as the negative moment of the system's dynamic – that is, as the momentary negation of the naïve *in itself* which constitutes the prelude to the self-conscious *in and for itself*. On the other hand, in his doctoral dissertation Kierkegaard described Socrates' irony as the ability of negating a whole cultural and spiritual mindset. This, argues Kierkegaard, is the necessary preparation for developing a more developed subjectivity which is generated as new insight concerning the human condition is gained – in other words, irony produces emptiness, making way for a new and qualitatively intensified plenitude.

Concluding this brief historical survey concerning the development of the concept of irony, I have connected the practice of the latter to the notion of 'philosophy as a way of life' formulated by Pierre Hadot in his studies of ancient philosophy. In this respect, after summarizing Hadot's views, I have discussed how Socratic irony can be understood as a typical instance of a spiritual exercise – namely, one of the many practices investigated by Hadot and which forms the backbone of the philosophical life, being the ascetic exercises that the philosopher undergoes to become wise. By doing so, I have laid the foundation for interpreting Lear, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard as heirs to the tradition of doing 'philosophy as a way of life,' insofar as all three of them make use of irony precisely in its function of spiritual exercise.

In the second half of Chapter 1, I have discussed Jonathan Lear's contemporary rendition of the concept of irony, and the way in which this connects with the rest of his production. Making specific reference to his book *A Case for Irony*, I have showed how Lear draws from Plato and Kierkegaard arguing for a definition of irony which he thinks is closer to the truth than that received from the rhetorical tradition. Specifically, Lear's position is that irony consists in the practice of exposing the way in which someone falls short of his own ideals of human excellence. In other words, Socrates's questions concerning the nature of courage, piety, etc., and Kierkegaard's criticism of Christendom as false Christianity are ironic insofar as they are able to make people unsure concerning whether or not they are actually courageous, pious, Christians, etc. . As Lear puts it, irony makes us unsure of our humanity – concomitantly proposing that a distinctive human life is achieved by fully living up to our ideals of human excellence. The moment we realize our failure to be human – that is, the moment in which we realize that we are falling short of our ideals of human excellence – irony shakes us by suddenly making our ideals unfamiliar to us.

Lear uses his account of irony in order to interpret the paralysis underwent by Socrates in the *Symposium* – in this case, he had exercised irony on himself – and I have extended his case by applying it to other passages from the Platonic dialogues where Socrates brings his interlocutors to a standstill: when we do not know anymore what it means to properly relate to our ideals of human excellence, we become suddenly unable to explain the content of our ideals; subsequently we become unable to act so as to express these ideals. It

follows that, if we become unsure concerning what it means to be human, we become totally unable to act insofar as this makes our whole existence temporarily unintelligible.

In order to further explore Lear's account of irony, I have connected it to the Ancient Greek notion of *aporia* – that is, "waylessness" – which is precisely the word by which Plato describes the paralyzing effects of Socrates' irony. In this sense, those suffering from *aporia* are momentarily unable to find a way to connect to their ideals. This means that, ironists like Socrates are individuals who are able to repeatedly instantiate aporetic events targeting both themselves and others. In this sense, an ironist is the one who always leaves the question of the achievement of his humanity open. Nonetheless, Lear seems to argue that precisely in this way the ironist commits himself to living a distinctively human life: somewhat complementing his initial claims, Lear admits that our appropriation of our ideal human excellence can never hope to be total. Therefore, living a distinctively human life means striving for achieving our ideals of human excellence, while accepting that this striving shall always be marked by moments of ironic disruption, followed by a process of growth by which the ironist becomes more rooted in his humanity. Of course, insofar as Socrates is a philosopher, Lear's description of irony can be interpreted as a description of what it meant for Socrates to practice philosophy as a way of life.

Trying to connect Lear's *A Case for Irony* to his previous works, I have turned to his investigations of some of the main issues and concepts in psychoanalysis. This was crucial for my investigation, insofar as Lear interprets Socrates as a precursor of psychoanalysis, and consequently he depicts psychoanalysis as a particular form of philosophy. In particular, I have verified how Lear had previously dealt with the concept of irony in his exploration of therapeutic action. In this respect, Lear describes the dynamics of therapeutic action employing the same terms he would later employ to describe the nature of irony. At the same time, the therapist is described in ways that make him resemble the ironist. In particular, the therapist ought to relate to the ideal of being a therapist in the same way in which the ironist relates to the ideal of being a human being. Therefore, it is not just the analysand but the therapist too who undergoes a process of growth and self-discovery during the analytic process.

This analogy between the ironist and the therapist is reinforced by the fact that Lear sees psychotherapy as providing a fitting environment for the taking place of irony. This happens thanks and through the psychoanalytic phenomenon of transference. In this respect, the analysand unconsciously transfers onto the analyst a number of psychic projections. In particular, the analysand relates to the analyst as if he manifested the presence of a figure that proved to be traumatic in the former's experience – for instance, an abusive father. The analyst reacts to this situation by retracting out of the transfer relationship, thereby allowing the analysand to become aware of his unconscious activity. This becoming-conscious of this unconscious activity manifests in the analysand's psyche as a form of ironic shock. As a result of the latter, the analysand develops his capacity to relate to his environment and to other people in a way which is less distorted by his psychic activities. In this perspective, the psychotherapist emerges as a particular kind of philosopher who practices irony as a spiritual exercise from within the context of the therapeutic relationship.

In the last portion of my exploration of Lear's work, I have focused on his discussion of human subjectivity and the way in which the latter is able to grow also thanks to subsequent ironic breaks. Specifically, I have explored Lear's discussion of the Freudian concept of erotic drive, as exposed in his book *Love and its Place in Nature*. There, Lear presents love as a force pervading both nature and human subjectivity – without being totally describable either in psychological or biological terms – and which is responsible for pushing the latter towards ever higher and more complex level of structuralization. Such a process is tendentially infinite, but gets clogged when the subject experiences traumatic events during his development. In Lear's opinion, the purpose of therapeutic action is that of unclogging the process of erotic development. Nonetheless, it should be noticed that the danger that the subject's development gets stuck once more can never be eliminated. Lear claims that the human mind is such that it can retain a sense of unity only at the price of being routinely disrupted. This happens, insofar as this unity by its nature needs to constantly unfold in new and more complex levels of subjectivity, but this necessarily involves the danger that some traumatic event might intervene to stop the process. Therefore, irony shall be needed again and again, with the goal of helping the action of the erotic drive to progress further. In this sense, the endless goal of philosophy as a way of life is structured as a process of erotic structuralization, that allows to develop ever higher and more complex forms of subjectivity.

In the first part of my treatment of Nietzsche's philosophy, I put forward the argument that Lear's account of irony can be meaningfully employed as an interpretative pattern for reading *David Strauss: the Confessor and the Writer.* Subsequently, I claimed that Nietzsche's practice of "philosophy as a way of life" includes the use of Socratic irony. In order to prove my claims, I have analyzed the figure of the Cultural Philistine as it is described by Nietzsche in *David Strauss*. In this respect, the Cultural Philistine is Nietzsche's characterization of the German intellectuals of his time as a human type that is completely detached by its own culture. In this sense, the Philistines are deluded individuals, who think of themselves as highly cultivated individuals and the true heirs of the great German culture of the past. Nietzsche attacks the Philistines by formulating his own concept of culture. In this respect, he thinks that true culture consists in the capacity of giving unity to all the expressions of one's existence – in particular, the crucial connection lies between what one knows and what one does – by composing them into a unitary "style" – that is, a particular way of existing and expressing oneself. The Philistines fail to do so, inasmuch as they are disconnected from their culture and they cannot connect the latter to the way they actually live. Moreover, they compartmentalize their existence in separate areas, which is another stumbling block for their capacity of living expressing a unitary style.

Under the terms of Lear's discussion of irony, the Philistines are people who fail to achieve a distinctively human life because they fall short of their ideal of human excellence – in this case, the ideal is that of being a truly cultivated human being. If this characterization is correct, it follows that Nietzsche's *DS* can be read as an ironic text, that by putting forward a concept of culture in contrast with that held by the Philistine. In other words, *DS* aims to cause ironic unsureness into the cultural Philistines, forcing them to re-consider their status as supposedly cultivated people. Crucially, I think that my reading is supported by Nietzsche's contrast between the Philistines and the great intellectual figures of the previous generations – e.g., Goethe – who he thinks were truly cultivated people, something manifested by the fact that they described and perceived themselves as perpetual 'seekers' – whereas he accuses the Philistines of considering themselves as 'finders.' In this sense, just like Lear, Nietzsche too seem to argue that a distinctively human life as the expression of true self-cultivation is achieved by being constantly exposed to risk, and by seeking to grow ever more in one's own cultivation. By contrast, the finder is the one who loses his own chance to

live a distinctive human life by supposing he has already achieved it. Crucially, if Nietzsche can meaningfully read employing the concept of "philosophy as a way of life," we should read his comments concerning true culture and the necessity of maintaining oneself into a "seeking posture" as positive characterizations of his way of living philosophy.

In the second section of my treatment of Nietzsche's philosophy, I have further explored his way of doing "philosophy as a way of life" by turning to *The Genealogy of Morals* and to the practice of genealogy. In this sense, after a brief discussion of Nietzsche's project in *GM*, I have proposed an interpretation of the practice of genealogy that reads it as a spiritual exercise – as opposed to other scholarly views that see in it a form of historical investigation. Specifically, I have argued that genealogy was the way through which Nietzsche attempted to expose the whole of European civilization to an ascetic exercise, which aimed to provide insight in the former's moral history. By doing so, Europeans would have been able to emerge from their condition of creeping cultural and spiritual stagnation, developing a new system of values making them able to thrive once more.

In order to further characterize the nature of genealogy as a spiritual practice, I have tied it to Nietzsche's discussion of the nature of morality in books such as *GM* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. In the light of these texts, I have argued that Nietzsche sees moral values as the result of a force which he famously calls the 'Will to power.' This is not so much a metaphysical substance underlying reality, but rather a representation of the framework within which human subjectivity and its environment should be interpreted and understood. In this respect, I have argued that Nietzsche's outline of the Will to Power can be likened to Freud's and Lear's discussion of the erotic drive. In a way closely resembling the structuring action of the erotic drive, the will to power is the conceptual description of the fact that life tends to overcome itself in order to become stronger and survive. From this point of view, moral values are the natural offshoots of this constant overcoming, insofar as they provide the elements through which the subject becomes able to form a coherent interpretation of itself and its environment. In Nietzsche's understanding, interpreting is conducive to mastering: therefore, self-interpretation and interpretations of one's own environment are conducive to self-mastery and mastery of one's own environment.

Just as it happens to the erotic drive, the will to power's tendency to constantly overcome its own expressions can become clogged. This is what – in my reading – Nietzsche is arguing when he accuses Christian morality of having stifled European life. Subsequently, Nietzsche's call for a transvaluation of values can be seen as his proclamation of the impelling necessity of an overcoming of the current morality. In this respect, genealogy becomes the tool for developing a critique of the ruling morality which goes in the direction of offering a service to the will to power – and therefore to existence itself. By showing the root of morality, and arguing that Christian interpretations and values have gone stale – to the point in which they have become dangerous to the very perpetration of the thing they ought to foster and preserve – genealogy can clarify one's own understanding by showing the necessity of developing new values. In this sense, it can be said that the practice of genealogy is a spiritual exercise, and that as such is conducive to the philosopher's further appropriation of wisdom – that is, at least insofar as the latter is understood as a "becoming powerful" that allows the philosopher to overcome himself and achieve a greater degree of mastery over himself and his environment.

In the final part of the second chapter of this dissertation, I have turned to *Ecce Homo*, a book that I have interpreted as Nietzsche's exercise of genealogy with respect to his own existence – that is, a use of genealogy aimed at the single individual as opposed to a whole culture. Accordingly, I have argued that in the book that represents his intellectual auto-biography, Nietzsche examines aspects of his existence that he considers to be crucial in order to explain the way in which he came to develop his interpretations and values. Reading *Ecce Homo* in connection with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I connected Nietzsche's self-analysis to the notion of *amor fati* and eternal return. In this respect, *amor fati* means appropriating everything that happened in one's existence – no matter how painful – insofar as every single event in our life has contributed to make us who we are. The thought of the eternal return – according to the interpretative line which I have attempted to develop – essentially conveys the idea that everything that exists is interrelated. Therefore, the capacity to love oneself integrally is tied to the capacity to love everything that exists, insofar as the love for what happened in our lives is necessarily tied to the love we feel to the circumstances that produced it – which implies loving the circumstances that produced the circumstances of what happened in our lives, etc. .

I have further argued that Nietzsche employed Zarathustra as a model human being, in order to express his ideal of human excellence. I claimed that through the Persian prophet Nietzsche wishes to depict a human being who has been able to fully express the quality of *amor fati*, as opposed to the mass of people inhabiting Europe – no doubt including the cultural Philistines he chastised in *DS* – that Nietzsche thinks is made unable to love existence because is possessed by bad moral values and interpretations. If this interpretation is sound, Zarathustra also offers a model of the philosophical life – as it were, one of the 'Philosophers of the future' adumbrated in *Beyond Good and Evil* – as somebody able to love his existence without omissions and fully in tune with the Will to power.

Finally, in the third and last chapter of my dissertation I dealt with Kierkegaard's use of irony throughout his authorship, with a close eye to his relationship with the predominantly cultural Christianity of his days.

I started my exposition with a reading of Kierkegaard's book review entitled *Two Ages*. In particular, I have dealt with Kierkegaard's social criticism contained in that text. The Danish philosopher criticizes his contemporaries for their lack of pathos, and their inclination to live lives which are ethically and spiritually mediocre. Subsequently, I connected *Two Ages* to Kierkegaard's posthumously published autobiography *The Point of View*, which further develops his social criticism. Under the terms that Kierkegaard's employs in the latter text, he understands the Danish and European society of his time – aka Christendom – as a delusion, whose inhabitants think they are living Christian lives in a Christian society. In turn, Kierkegaard claims that Christendom maintains nothing but the façade of Christianity, and that most people who live in it exist in ways which are *de facto* non-religious.

Kierkegaard is persuaded that the truth that Christendom is not Christian cannot be communicated directly – that is, Christendom cannot be simply attacked frontally and taken by storm. He expresses the belief that people who live engulfed in a delusion will retreat further into themselves if accused. In turn, they need to be 'deceived into the truth' – that is, they must be baited out of Christendom, so that the deception may be defeated by means of another deception. In the light of these elements, I have argued that it is possible to identify a practice of Socratic irony in Kierkegaard's authorial approach. In particular, I have used

Lear's terminology and ideas from chapter 1 – in a way, retro-applying them to their original context within Kierkegaard's thought – in order to identify and outline Kierkegaard's use of irony. In this respect, I have read the inhabitants of Christendom as individuals who fail to live up to their ideals of human excellence – in this case, being Christians – insofar as their social practices and received understandings of what it means to live a Christian life fail to help them connect to their ideal of human excellence. Accordingly, Kierkegaard's "deception into the truth" should be understood as an ironic attempt of drawing his readers out of their self-deceptions.

In the rest of the first part of the third chapter, I have tried to outline the specific ways in which Kierkegaard puts into practice his ironic efforts. In this respect, I offered a reading of some of his pseudonymous works, showing the ironic intentions underlying them. At the same time, I have given a reading of the *Upbuilding Discourses* as texts that instantiate what Lear calls a "restricted form of irony" – that is, a form of Socratic irony that does not seek to cause a paradigm shift in its target, but that rather tries to further root the latter in its pretense. In this sense, the *Discourses* should be read as tools produced by Kierkegaard in order to support those who were broken free from Christendom's delusions. The *Discourses* are written spiritual exercises aimed at those who have accessed a different and new way of living Christianity, and who seek to grow in their relationship to the Christian ideal of human excellence.

In the second part of the third chapter I have explored Kierkegaard's understanding of poetry, contrasting his critical view of Romantic poetry with his positive view of religious poetry, as well as his description of God himself as being some kind of poet. The goal of this section, was to attempt to describe in what way Kierkegaard understood his role as a philosopher and as an author. Where Lear explicitly understands himself as a psychotherapist-philosopher, and Nietzsche seems to see himself as a sort of social criticist-philosopher, I have argued that Kierkegaard developed the figure of the religious poet as a means to describe his authorship – therefore, his authorship also *qua* philosopher, whatever else Kierkegaard may have been. In this respect, the aim of the religious poet is that of describing the Christian existential ideal, and to encourage his audience to develop a pathos for striving after this ideal. Therefore, I have suggested that Kierkegaard's pseudonymous

writings aim to show indirectly the pre-eminence of the Christian life by allowing the reader to reflect on the features of the difference existence spheres – insofar as these are instantiated by the characters portrayed in the different books, as well as by the pseudonymous authors themselves. In turn, the religious works – which includes both signed texts like the *Upbuilding Discourses* and the pseudonymous authorship of Anti-Climacus – portrays the Christian life directly.

In the third and final portion of chapter 3 I have given a deeper look at the way in which Kierkegaard presents the Christian ideal of human excellence. I have started with giving a reading of the category of the single individual as that person who have successfully left the 'crowd' – that is, the anonymous mass of people populating Christendom – and has become an individual in the religious sense, thereby relating in a proper way to the Christian ideal. Subsequently, I have turned to Anti-Climacus' *Practice in Christianity* in order to better define the way in which Kierkegaard thought the single individual should relate to Christ as the Christian ideal. In this respect, Kierkegaard traces a distinction between those who admire Christ and those who imitate him. Christ's admirers are content with contemplating him in his ascended glory: Kierkegaard chastises this position, characterizing it as a false form of Christianity, insofar as it misses the point that Christ's greatness lies in his willingness to renounce his glory and suffer the perils of a mortal life. Hence, the admirers of Christ fail to look at his life with the right perspective. In turn, true Christ-following is performed by those who want to imitate his lifestyle. Kierkegaard characterizes the latter as consisting eminently in a willingness to renounce any instinct to self-glorification, and rather embrace the suffering and the abasement that shall inevitably occur to those who wish to proclaim the truth. Suffering for the truth in abasement, while being nourished and sustained by the hope of a future glory and by Christ's sacrifice is the essence of the Christian life, and the ideal anyone who wants to live a Christian life should strive for.

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